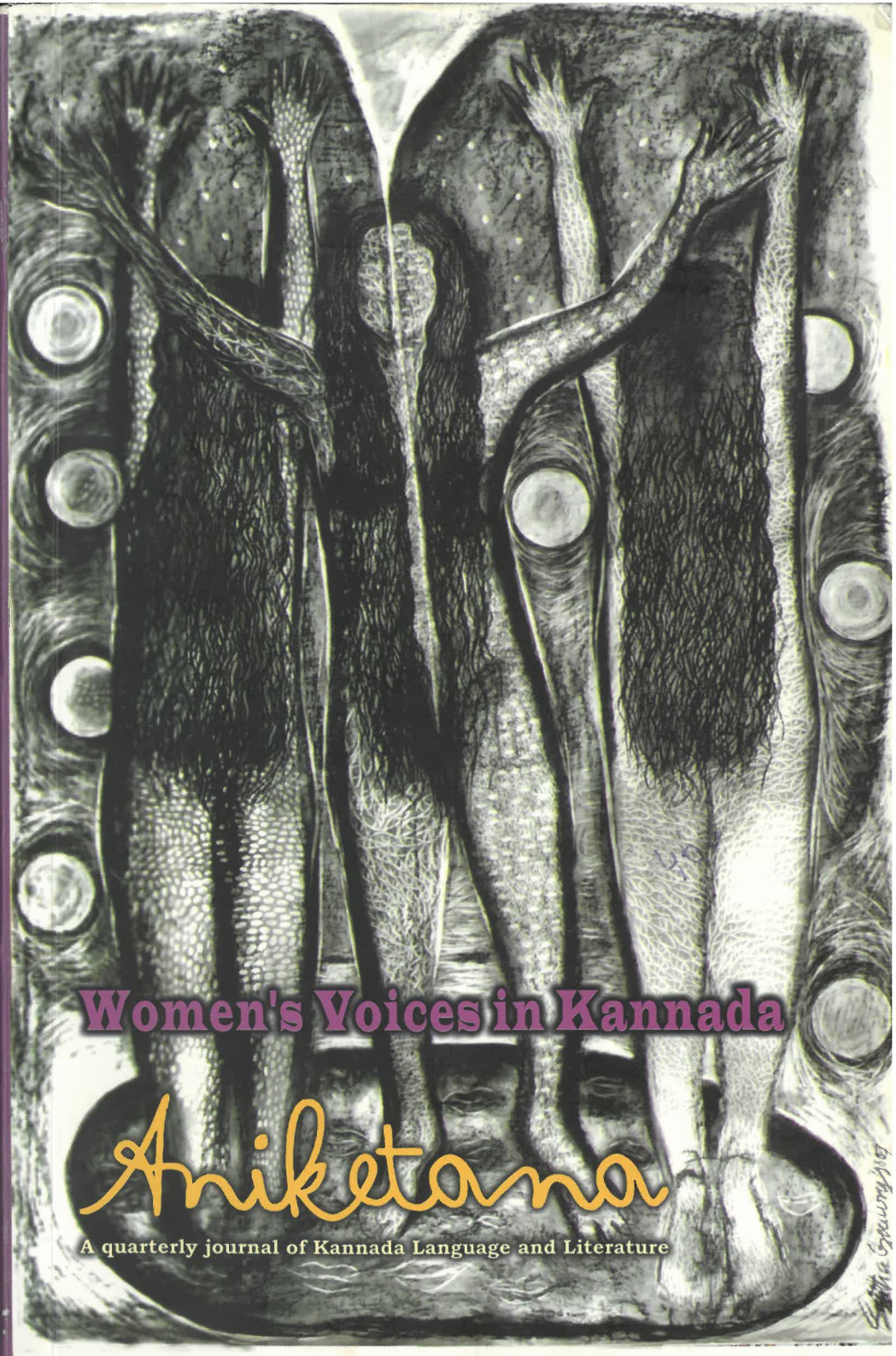
Women's Voices in Kannada

Aniketana



Women's Voices in Kannada

Aniketana

A quarterly journal of Kannada Language and Literature

First Grade College For Women, Jalahalli, Bangalore-13
Sir. M. Visvesvaraya
Ref No.
Date.

ANIKETANA

A quarterly journal of Kannada Language and Literature

Women's Voices In Kannada

Jan 2012 - December 2012
(Combined Edition)

ANIKETANA

A quarterly journal of Kannada Language and Literature

Chief Editor
Prof: Malati Pattanashetti

Editor
Deepa Ganesh

Karnataka Sahithya Academy
Kannada Bhavana, J.C. Road
Bengaluru-560002
Phone: 080- 22211730/ 22106460
www.karnatakasahithyaacademy.org
Email: sahithya.academy@gmail.com

ANIKETANA (a quarterly journal of Kannada language and literature) Jan 2011-December 2011

This Journal is registered with the Registrar of News Papers in India vide registration number : 45647/88

Volume No: XXVIII to XXXI - 1
Jan-2012 to Dec-2012 (Combined Edition)

Copies: 500
Pages: 318

Chief Editor
Prof: Malati Pattanashetti
Chairperson
Karnataka Sahithya Academy

Publisher
C.H. Bhagya
Registrar
Karnataka Sahithya Academy
Kannada Bhavana, J.C. Road
Bengaluru-560002

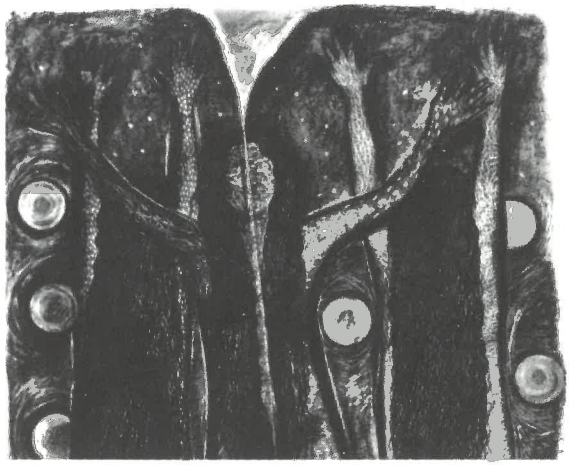
Subscription Tariff
Per Copy: ₹ 50
Annual Subscription: ₹ 200
Life Subscription: ₹ 1000
For subscription and copies contact the Registrar.

Book Design and Illustrations by: **gchannakeshava@gmail.com**

Printed at: **Svan Printers,** Chamarajapet, Bengaluru. Ph: 080 2674 2233

We dedicate this issue to

AKKAMAHADEVI



Akkamahadevi (Detail) Painting by: Sajitha R. Shankar, Charcoal on paper, 8x4feet. 2008 Akkamahadevi series

Look, the fantasy of the woman
haunts the man as Maya
Look, the fantasy of the man
haunts the woman as Maya
To the world immersed in Maya
Look, the ways of the sharana appear peculiar
For the sharana who is graced by
Channamallikarjuna's love,
There is no Maya, no ignorance, no fantasy too.

(Articulation of an idea must evoke simplicity, but the idea in itself must be complex. If one can take this as the benchmark

of any good work of art, the above Akkamahadevi's vachana stands testimony. This translation of the vachana can only come close to what Akka is saying and much of the meaning is to be found in its mystery, in what remains uncovered. Akka believes that notions of man and woman that we cling to are mere constructs and almost echoes Jedara Dasimayya's 'naduve suliva atma gandu alla, hennu alla.')

Translated by
Deepa Ganesh

CONTENTS

Editor's Note 13

STORIES

R. Kalyanamma 17

Her Upliftment 22
– *Saraswati Bai Rajwade*

Sacrifice 29
– *Kodagina Gouramma*

The Orphan 36
– *H.V. Savitramma*

A Quarter-Penny Coin 60
– *Devangana Shastri*

The Problematic Child 68
The Full Pot 70
– *Triveni*

The Question 72
– *Aryamba Pattabhi*

Such a Story... 80
– *Usha Navaratnaram*

Saani 88
– *C.N. Mukta*

Withering Fringes 98
– *Geeta Nagabhushana*

Shantavva, The Mother
Rudreshi, The Son 109
– *M.S. Veda*

The Birth 123
– *Sarah Aboobacker*

The Inner Life 131
– *Vaidehi*

A Story In This Way 141
– *Veena Shanteshwara*

Happalada Seethamma 150
– *Savitha Nagabhushana*

Dining Table and Upma 156
– *Vasumathi Udupa*

Bangle 166
– *Sabeeha Bhoomigowda*

Kalidasa in a Tempo 178
– *Sunanda Kadame*

A New Birth 182
– *Nemichandra*

The Moustachioed Woman 198
– *Uma Rao*

Motherhood 203
– *H. Nagaveni*

Rain of Fire 215
– *Bhanu Mushtaq*

Severed Ties 229
– *Mitra Venkataraju*

POEMS

Don't Taunt the Poet 242
– *Belagere Janakamma*

Paint Me a Forest 244
Forbidden, Says Who? 244
– *Prathibha Nandakumar*

My Sun 249
– *Malathi Pattanashetty*

Daughter to a Good Father and
Wife to a Good Husband 252
– *Lalitha Siddabasavaiah*

Thoughts of Perfume 257
The Mind That Left 258
– *Sandhyadevi*

CONVERSATION

Women Writing in Kannada Literature -
Trends And Issues — Conversation with
Savitha Nagbhushan 260
– *Sabitha Bannadi*

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Nenapu: Sihi-Kahi — Excerpts from the
autobiography 271
– *Anupama Niranjana*

NOVEL

Sadananda (Excerpt from novel) 284
– *M.K. Indira*

PAGES OF THE PAST

Masti Venkateshiyengar's Response to Nanjanagudu Tirumalamba 294

THEMATIC ESSAY

The Mother, in our Minds 298
– *B.N. Sumitrabai*

A Constantly Widening Canvas 308
– *M.S. Asha Devi*

THE ANIKETANA TEAM 316

EDITOR'S NOTE

Deepa Ganesh

The title of our issue, Women's Writing in Kannada, itself seems like a teaser to me. Do we ever, or have there ever been instances when a collection has been titled, 'Men's writing in Kannada'? Applying the same logic, why should a collection be labelled as 'Women's Writing'? Take any creative form, the male experience has always been privileged and the woman has been pushed into silences, erasures of the historical process. Since most of our compilations, selections etc.make the male voice most legitimate, the need for such a category has arisen. In most anthologies, women writers appear as tokenisms, very similar to the 33 per cent reservation in government bodies. Even in a milestone work, *Saalu Deepagalu*, it is surprising how that in the huge list of writers whose life and works have been documented, there are hardly any women. When a process fails to make organic choices, it perhaps becomes imperative to find forced categories and it is completely justified as well. At this juncture, I feel it is important to express my amusement at often heard remarks such as, 'she is a fine woman poet', 'she is perhaps the best woman critic' so on and so forth. In fact, it turns out to be that without limiting the 'she' to her gender, she could easily be called the 'best poet' and 'best critic'.

Historically, women could make very few social choices, almost none. However, women, over the last 150 years in Kannada literature, have thrown themselves into the social arena with enormous conviction and have braved the severe criticism that came their way with soul force. Kannada has seen exemplary women like Tirumalamba, Kalyanamma and Saraswatibai Rajwade who believed social responsibility is not merely a man's worry, but a woman's as well. The early Kannada writers, through their soaring spirits, changed many

things for the future generations. They made huge sacrifices, took bold decisions, so much so that a woman of the 21st century can live her freedom completely ignorant of such a past.

The selection for this journal (we have combined two issues into one) was a tough one and in no way can it be called complete. I've worked hard to make it representational, but cannot claim success. The body of the work of women writers in Kannada is so huge that if someone actually decides to put together an anthology, it can be as significant as Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha's work. The range and sheer variety is mind boggling, in every sense of the word.The kind of work that many of these women have done coping with societal and personal constraints is unbelievable. I remain deeply moved by their commitment.

I am indebted to Vaidehi for listening to me. One just assumes K.V. Akshara's help and advice and I am immensely thankful to him for everything. Without Akshara and Dr. H.N. Muralidhara, who kept prodding me to find more meaning in *Akkamahadevi's Vachana*, I fear that the translation would have remained severely incomplete. How can I thank them enough for being with me patiently through each version? Taking on my urgency as his own, I thank Krishnamurthy Hanur for providing me with excerpts from *Sati Hitaishini Chintanamale*. I am grateful to H.S. Raghavendra Rao's constant concern and engagement with my work. Thanks to Ashadevi for her promptness and B.N. Sumitra Bai for providing *Kalyana Saraswati*. I thank all the writers for their extremely cordial response and pleasing enthusiasm.

This issue has involved a huge team of translators, and I thank each of them personally for putting up with my constant prodding and reminding. With all their personal pressures if they did commit themselves to this work, it is their goodwill and allegiance to literature.

The homey comfort that registrar Bhagya and Chairperson Malathi Pattanashetty provide during each of my visits to the Academy is something I cherish. Their concern and advice is also invaluable. Thanks to all the staff members of Sahitya Academy, particularly to Vijaya and Soubhagya. Without

Channakeshava's creative interpretation it would remain a bundle of black and white sheets!

I dedicate this issue to the phenomenal Akkamahadevi, the earliest woman's voice.

Deepa Ganesh
July 14, 2015
deepa.oldworld@gmail.com

STORIES

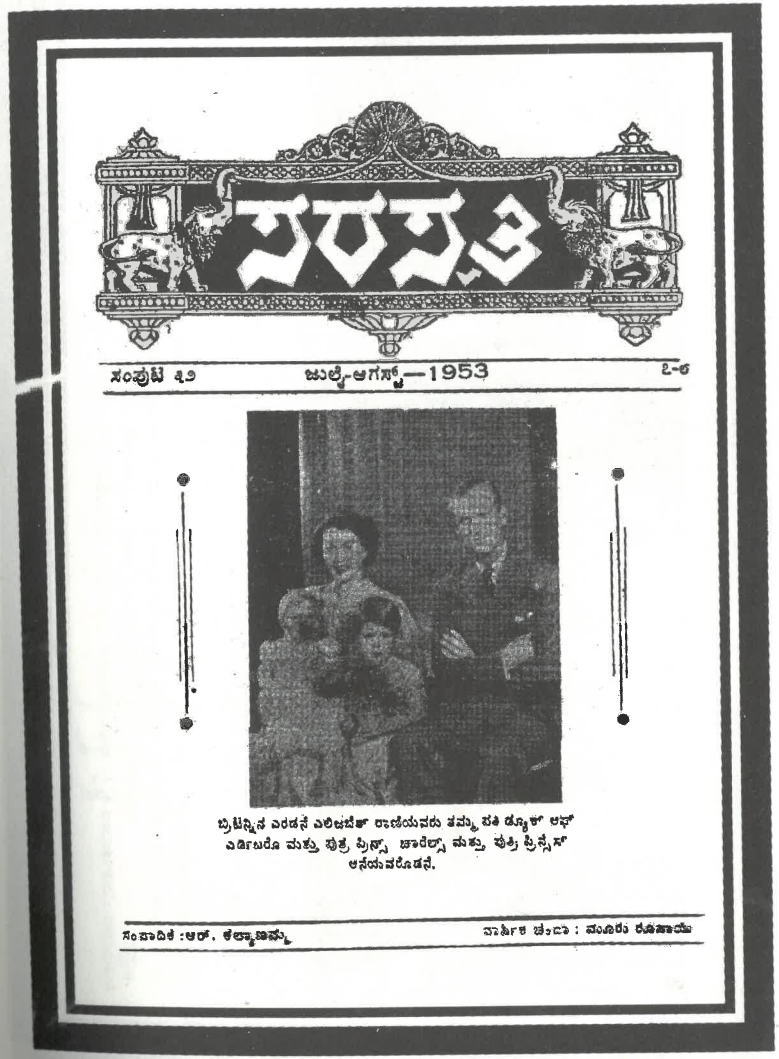
R. KALYANAMMA

R. Kalyanamma (1894-1965) faced many difficulties during her life. But she remained undeterred by all that society of her time imposed on women and actively involved herself in social activities. She was largely appreciated for service mindedness, and won many a recognition. Nikhila Bharatha Sahitya Samaj of Kolkata gave her Vidya Vinodini title in 1918. In 1935, Mysore king Sri Krishnaraja Wadiyar gave her a gold medal, and in 1960 she even got an invitation from American president John F. Kennedy to visit their country. She set up the Sharada Stree Samaj, Akhila Karnataka Makkala Koota, apart from running her own newspaper *Saraswati.*

Kalyanamma wrote 24 plays, around 26 stories, 6 novels, apart from essays, poems and children's literature.

Several books have been written about Kalyannamma, of them the most important are *Kalyana Saraswati* by Dr. B.N. Sumitrabai, *R. Kalyanamma* by S.D. Shashikala, *R. Kalyanamma* — Life and works by H.S. Parvathi.

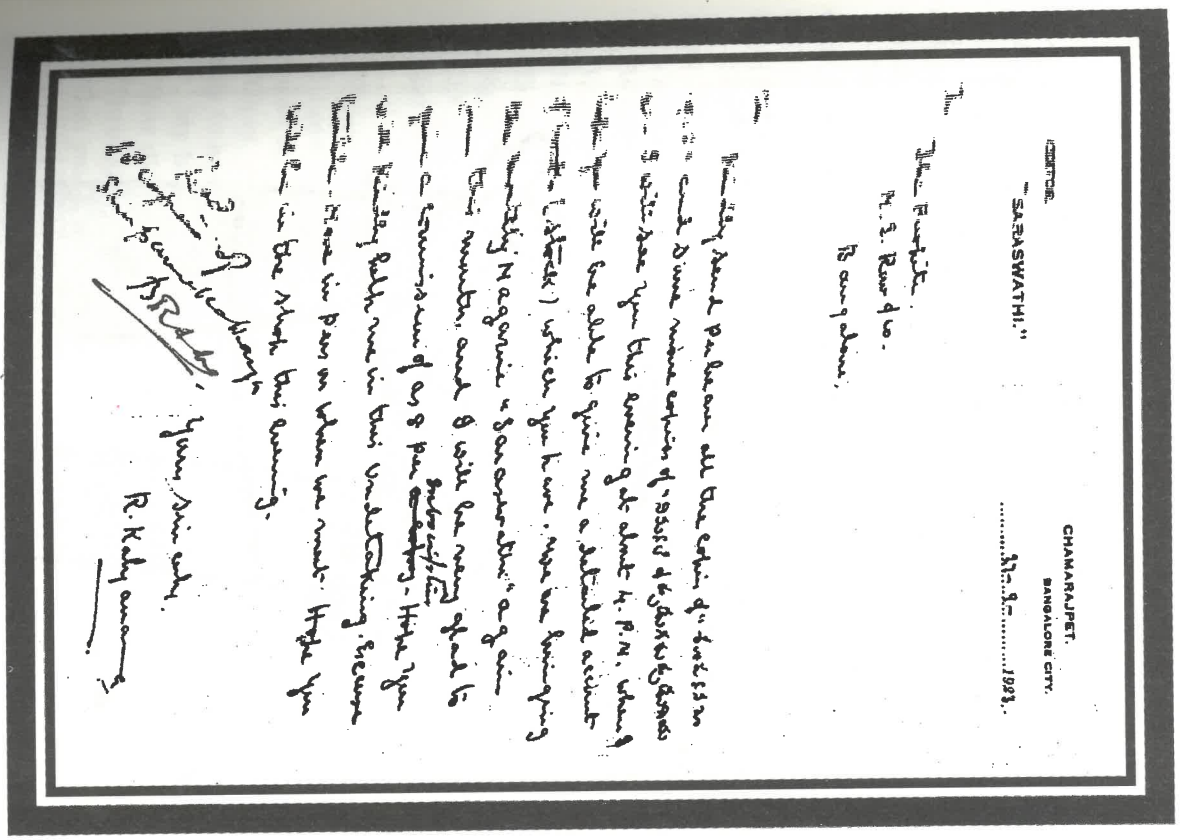
R. KALYANAMMA



ಕನ್ನಡ ಸಾಹಿತ್ಯ ಪರಿಷತ್ತಿನ ಶ್ರೀ ಕೃಷ್ಣರಾಜ ಪರಿಷನ್ಮಂದಿರದಲ್ಲಿ ೧೯೪೯ರ ಮಾರ್ಚ್ ಕೊನೆಯವಾರದಲ್ಲಿ ನಡೆದ "ಸರಸ್ವತಿ" ಮಾಸಪತ್ರಿಕೆಯ ರಜತ ಮಹೋತ್ಸವ ಸಮಾರಂಭದ ಸಂದರ್ಭದಲ್ಲಿ ತೆಗೆದ ಚಿತ್ರ

ಕುಳಿತಿರುವವರು ಎಡಗಡೆಯಿಂದ : 3. ಶ್ರೀ ಡಿ. ಸಿ. ಸುಬ್ಬರಾಯಪ್ಪ (ನಿವೃತ್ತ ಸರ್ಕಾರಿ ಸಚಿವ), 5. ಶ್ರೀ. ಕೆ. ಶಾಮರಾಜಯ್ಯಂಗಾರ್ (ಮಾಜಿ ಪುರಸಭಾಧ್ಯಕ್ಷ) 6. ಶ್ರೀಮತಿ ಆರ್. ಕಲ್ಯಾಣಮ್ಮ, 7. ಶ್ರೀಮತಿ ಎಚ್. ವೈ. ಸರಸ್ವತಮ್ಮ (ಮೈಸೂರು ಮಕ್ಕಳಕೂಟದ ಕಾರ್ಯದರ್ಶಿ) 8. ಶ್ರೀಮತಿ ನಾಗಮ್ಮ (ಕನ್ನಡ ಸಾಹಿತ್ಯ ಪರಿಷತ್) 9. ಶ್ರೀಮತಿ ಕೆ. ಟಿ. ಬನಶಂಕರಮ್ಮ, 10. ಶ್ರೀಮತಿ ವೇದಪತಿ ಆರ್. ರಾವ್, 11. ಶ್ರೀಮತಿ ಜಿ. ಲಲಿತ, 12. ಶ್ರೀಮತಿ ಮುತ್ತುಬಾಯಿ ಮಾಸ.

ನಿಂತಿರುವವರು : ಎಡಗಡೆಯಿಂದ 3. ಶ್ರೀ ಸುಬೋಧರಾಮರಾವ್ 5. ಶ್ರೀ ಸಿ. ಕೆ. ನಾಗರಾಜರಾವ್, 7. ಶ್ರೀ ಶಾಂಷರ್ ಗುರುಮೂರ್ತಿ, 9. ಶ್ರೀ ಎಸ್. ಶ್ರೀನಿವಾಸಮೂರ್ತಿ (ಪರಿಮಳ)


CHAMARAJPET.
BANGALORE CITY.

"SARASWATHI."

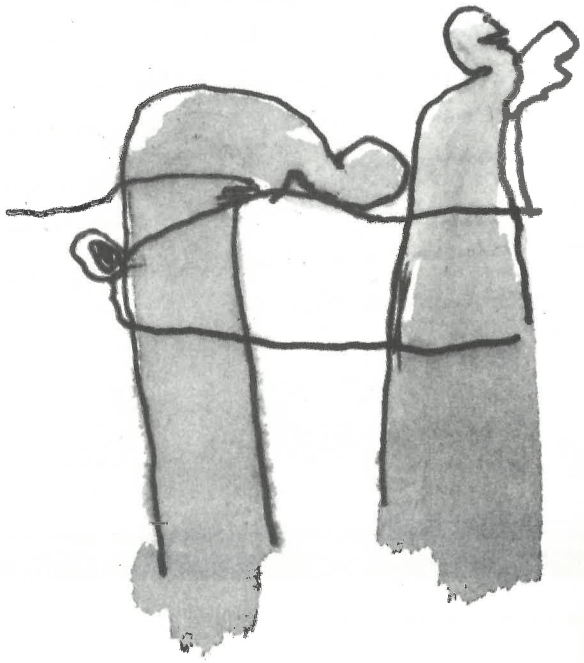
.....1931.

Photos courtesy: Kalyana Saraswati, edited by B.N. Sumitrabai

HER UPLIFTMENT

Saraswati Bai Rajwade

Saraswati Bai Rajwade's(1913-94) output was huge. She wrote stories, essays, columns for magazines and journals, and she wrote about every conceivable subject. In her column *'Akkana Olegalu'*, her writings were on education, dowry, widowhood, so on and so forth. She condemned math seers openly and for the health magazine *Nisarga* she even wrote health and beauty columns. For someone who was given to progressive views, and brought out a journal like *Suprabhata*, it was hard to accept her in her spirituality garb.



A fallen woman was standing before the home for widows. 'Lady, do not feel shy, please come in. Think this as your home. This Ashram was set up to provide a home for the likes of you, who are threatened by this monster called society.'

The woman's eyes welled up. For a fault that was not even mine, my so-called dear ones threw me out and reduced me to a beggar. And here are these great people who welcome an orphaned woman like me with abundant human concern.

She followed the founder into the Ashram. A spacious room. It was clear that it was the office room. The person sat on his chair and pulled out the book of records.

'Where do you come from dear lady?'

'Chintamani'

'Name?'

'Gopi.'

'Age?'

'23.'

'Do you have children?'

'....'

'Please tell, don't feel shy.'

'I have been in this state for the last ten years. When my fortunes fell I hadn't even come of age...'

'Okay, a child widow. But what is the reason for your family to abandon you now?'

'...My brother-in-law... I am seven months pregnant.'

'How did you come to know of our Ashram.'

'Through advertisements in newspapers.'

'Can you read and write?'

'I never went to school. But I can read...'

'Alright. You will have no worry henceforth. We will place you in the Prakruta Matrumandira department. The matron will certainly shower love on you.'

*

A widower stood before the Ashram. 'Please come in sir. Think of this as your own place. Don't hesitate. Please come in.'

The man followed the person. Both walked into a private room.

'I saw your advertisement in a reputed newspaper. I have a huge house. Abundant wealth. No children. She passed away a year ago. She was an ailing woman, no pleasure whatsoever. I know I've passed age, yet I dream of having a child, an heir to my wealth. I can no longer wed a young woman you see...!'

'Che, who said you are old? Would you be 50 at the most? I doubt even that. The westerners believe that 50 is second youth. It is for the likes of you, and for the destitute that we, with great difficulty, run this Ashram. How many good householders like you have walked away in happiness from here! So many widows and orphans have found their respect here. God's grace. You can choose the woman of your choice – the one that is suitable for your pleasure. There are child widows, slightly older ones, women with children, pregnant women... you can choose any. Think of her as your wife.'

'Okay...I want a young, single woman. What would be your charges?'

'Gentlemen like you shouldn't ask such questions. This money will be spent on orphans. Does it matter how much it will be? As much as you can.'

'500?'

'Sir...!'

'Okay, thousand?'

'You must see our Gopi. She is bewitching. Noble. We have taken care of her like our daughter all these years. The thousand rupees you offer is not even the value of her beautiful tresses. Come here, near this window. There she is, watering the tulsi. She will be your wife tomorrow. Let her life look up marrying a rich man like you'

'What..?! ... It's her? Okay, without another word I will pay 5000 rupees. May your Ashram live long. May such woman abound here. Can the wedding happen here, tomorrow?'

'Can we say no...?'

'See you then'

'See you.'

*

They were speaking in the open area of the Ashram.

'Why are you feeling sad dear?'

'Please allow me to stay here. I lost my chastity by force, but in my heart, I believe in traditional value system, I respect and value it. In my soul I am pure and wish to live so till I die. Please do not force me against my wishes. All these days, you took care of me like my parents would, please do not abandon me now. I was told that the Ashram will not enforce anything on me, is that a lie?

'Don't be mad dear! You are so young. People of your age are floating in an ocean of pleasure. What looks you have! You do not even know what the love of a man is! Don't take these things to heart. You will be a rich man's wife. Lots of wealth, good husband, and moreover he has no one. You will not have to deal with inlaws. He has no children from his earlier marriage. You will be free. We will be overjoyed with your happiness. The goal of this Ashram is to uplift people like you. Also, if you stay here forever how will we be able to take care of you. We are here to show you the path. If you violate our wishes, we will also have to resort to other means!'

'What is the meaning of Ammaji's sermons then?'

'Adultery is wrong. Living with a single man is not wrong. If you live like a dutiful wife, it will be your route to salvation.'

'What about my child?'

'What child my girl? It is a symbol of immoral life. Begotten by the lust of a lecherous man. Let it stay in the Ashram. It will live with other orphans, go to the art school, and earn fame. Don't tell anyone that it is your child. Let that episode of your life be kept in the dark.'

What can she possibly say? Can she possibly have her way? The next day, the official at the Ashram received Rs. 5000 from his left hand, and with his right he sent her away.

*

Just a few days after their marriage, in the dead of night, 'wicked charmer! Enough of your coquettish ways. Who said I cannot drink? If I don't enjoy my money, who should? I married you a year ago. Atleast if a child was born there would be some meaning to it. If I drink to forget my woes, what is your problem? If you overstep your role, I will kick you.'

'It's not like that. I have heard drinking is bad. Forget about money, it is spoiling your health. Why do you continue to drink, and trouble your soul as well...'

'Mine is a troubled soul. Moreover, when I am married to a nincompoop like you, what more do I need to trouble my soul? Drinking is not new to me, get lost! I have every right to throw you out, who are you to advise me? I have enough money to bring ten people like you. Didn't I squander 5000 rupees on someone as useless as you?'

'Why do you keep calling me names? Does your heart agree to this? Or do you say this so that the neighbours are fooled? What makes you call me useless? Even though to the world we are a couple, we are actually father-daughter. Tell me, have you been able to touch me the way a man touches a woman? How then did you come to the conclusion that I am no good? I am anyway a fallen woman, what do I have to shy away from? In fact, I would have been better off in this society had I been useless! The fact that I conceived became my sin – I am not sterile, my child, my beautiful baby is growing in the ashram.....'

'What, you are an adultress!? Great, I paid 5000 rupees for a prostitute like you!! Why didn't that son of a ***** tell me all this? Oh, my five thousand!!'

'Did I beg you to be taken? Who did you give the money to? Why? How do I know all this? What do you gain by tormenting me like this? I am an orphan, a sinner, unfortunate woman... even my marriage to you doesn't give me peace or dignity... I am a destitute who is ill fated...'

Two solid kicks!!

'Pleasure! What more do you want? Didn't you eat enough? Didn't you have enough to wear? After all this, you back answer me? You call me impotent? Monster, sinner, just get out of here. Just leave my house, this instant!'

'Oh god, Where do I go in the dead of night!!!'

'Go, go to your child's father. Bugger off. Five thousand. I am going to take care of that fellow...'

The drunkard pushed her out of the house and shuts the door on her. Homeless again.

*

As she was walking in that dark night,

'Oh lady, who are you? Why are you roaming the streets in this night?'

'My fate! What more can I tell you?'

'You are so beautiful?'

'...'

'Why don't you talk? I feel you've walked out of home. Don't worry. Mehboobi will be very happy. Will you come?'

'Who is this Mehboobi?'

'Why ask such questions? You can spend your days in happiness?'

'Let's go. What's the point in fearing the rising world of rising waters? Let me see what's in store for me. I will atleast see the true colour of this world.'

'You are a very smart woman. Come this way.'

*

On reaching Mehboobi's house:

'Boobajaan, I've a nice bird for you.'

'Who's that? Why are you shouting? ' On seeing her, 'Ah, who is this beauty? Come darling, you are my daughter. Come, this way.'

What would she say? She saw the decorated house with pained eyes. She realised how her future in this house was going to be. They set her on the job the very next day.

Is this what the Ashram was meant for?

Her upliftment!

Translated by
Deepa Ganesh

SACRIFICE

Kodagina Gouramma

Kodagina Gouramma (1912-39) had a very short life. Born in Madikeri, she used to write under the psuedonym Mrs. BTG Krishna. She came from a family that was interested in politics and Gouramma too worked for the National Congress. Once when Gandhiji visited Kodagu, she invited him home and donated all her ornaments for the Harijan fund. Her published works are Kambani and Chiguru.

SACRIFICE

I was a post graduate, holding an M.A. My parents were planning my marriage and were looking for a girl. After a bit of search, they found the right girl, in a village about 12 miles from our house. Her parents were very poor. I had always dreamt of getting a well-off girl as my wife. I had hoped to go to England and become a barrister. To do so, I needed a lot of money, but, my parents could not afford it. My dream would be fulfilled only if I found a father-in-law who could sponsor me; I did not want to marry this poor girl.

After an evening walk, I returned home. My father was very conventional, and performed his religious duties without fail. He also expected me to do so, but I set out for my evening walk and was engrossed in a conversation with friends, and forgot all about it. When I returned home, my father was meditating. I went to my room to change clothes, and found my sister Vijaya studying there. I had nicknamed her 'Vi'. She too used to spend time every evening in the prayer room singing devotional songs. Surprised, I asked her, 'What are you reading, Vi?'

Vi threw the book on the table and said, 'Nothing! What can this worthless book possibly have?'

'Aren't you singing today?' I asked, and she said, 'Finished, already!'

I took off my coat and began loosening my tie, when Vi asked, 'Anna, do you accept?'

'Do I accept what?' I asked.

'Oh! Of course, you have no idea at all! I ask you if the girl is acceptable to you and you ask me what?!' she said.

'But I haven't even seen her! How can I give my consent?' I asked.

'Anna, I have seen her and feel she will be a suitable life partner to you in every way. Also, she is educated. And beautiful too,' Vijaya said.

'How much is the dowry?'

Vijaya said, 'Anna, father is against taking dowry in any form, as the girl's family cannot afford to give anything. But the girl is a beauty. Her parents wanted to give about Rs. 500, but father refused to accept it.'

'Vi, I have a great desire to go to London to study Law. I will marry the girl only if her family can afford to send me there,'

'Anna, you have a Master's degree; how can you afford to speak like this? Do you wish to sell yourself?' she said angrily and walked away as I did not respond.

I finished my round of meditation and found that Father too had completed his.

'What was it that you told Vijaya?' he asked me, but again, I preferred to maintain silence. Father continued, 'You seem to have decided that you will marry only if they can assist you in continuing your education. The family is very poor, with six to seven girls. Is it not such a struggle to marry the girls? You are not an innocent young child that cannot understand matters of the world. The girl too is beautiful. I am not agreeable to you getting married to a well-off girl and going to London. I want you to marry the girl we have selected for you and continue your education in Law right here. I will finance it, even if it proves a little difficult for me. If you don't listen to me, I cannot accept you as my son. Think about it and tell me tomorrow.'

I was furious. I did not wish by any means to marry this girl, although I would not dare to say so to my father. That night, when everybody at home was asleep, I left the house. The railway station was four miles from our house, and it was midnight when I reached there. There was still about 10 minutes for the train to leave. I got a ticket to Madras and sat in an empty compartment. Wondering about my future, I fell asleep, but my sleep was disrupted by some sound in the compartment. I found somebody sitting in front of me. It was a full moon night, with enough light so I could tell that it was an elderly gentleman. I was all alone in the compartment when we left my village, and the gentleman must have gotten in somewhere on the way. Although quite senior in age, he was dressed like a much younger man. It was also evident from his clothes that he was well-off, and I felt that it would benefit me if

I befriended him. He was looking at me, but did not speak. Instead, I took a chance at beginning a conversation with him, 'Sir, could you please tell me the time?'

'It is 10 to two,' he said, looking at his watch.

*

He seemed fond of a good chat, and initiated a conversation after I started talking. By the time we reached Madras, we had become good friends. The old man was a jeweller. When he asked about me, I said that although I was from a poor household, I had completed an MA and was going to Madras in search of employment. He, in turn, told me to meet him if I did not get any job in Madras.

We reached Madras by then, and I went to the YMCA hostel, where I had stayed as a student. Many of my old friends were still there. I stayed there that day, spending time with them.

My hunt for a job began the next day, but my search proved futile. Even after two weeks, I had no job in hand. The little money I had was all spent, and I worried about food also. As a last resort, I went to the house of my old friend from the train. Fortunately for me, he was at home when I went there. He was greatly pleased to meet me again.

His daughter and a niece by distant relation were staying with him. He asked me if I would take classes for them. As I was jobless and struggling, I agreed gratefully.

I started taking classes right from the next day. His daughter was about 14-years-old, while his niece was about 16-years-old. His daughter was good-looking, but his niece was extremely beautiful. The daughter was a good learner, but again, the niece was very quick at picking whatever I taught. But, while the daughter was quite a talker, the niece preferred to speak only when spoken to. Also, the daughter always had a smile on the face. The niece's beautiful face seemed to have some hidden pain on it — and yet, the withered look gave a charm to her face, making you want to keep looking at it. The daughter's name was Seetha; Shanthi was the niece.

It was now six months since I started taking classes. Both the girls were good students. Shanthi's beauty, the look of sorrow along with the good looks, her interest in studies, the preference for silence over talk, continued to attract me towards her greatly, and made me want to keep looking at her. She was the niece of a High Court judge, but her parents were very poor. They had been struggling for long to marry her off, as they could not afford to give dowry.

I was lost in my dreams of Shanthi. But, if I married her, my dream of going to London would remain merely a dream, and tried to forget her. It was not an easy task, as her beauty and other features kept attracting me.

I could, for one, marry Seetha. In fact, there were several occasions when her father used to call me his son-in-law jovially. She was his only child too. It seemed quite obvious that her father wished to marry her to me, while for me, going to London would become quite easy if I married Seetha. But, my love for Shanthi had led my mind to prefer love over money.

I still hoped to go to London, which kept me from approaching Shanthi's parents and beg for her hand.

It was nine o'clock that day. I was sitting in my classroom, waiting for my students. I was, in reality, waiting for Shanthi, and this made me look up with great excitement as the door opened. But, it was Seethawho entered. I was surprised that Shanthi, who always accompanied her, was not there, and also a little disappointed.

I found it odd to ask immediately, 'Where is Shanthi?' But, before I could say anything, Seetha herself said, 'Sir, Shanthi's father came here last night and took her home. Do you know why? For marriage!'

Now, I realised that I could not live without Shanthi. I cursed myself for not asking her parents for her hand. But what could I do now? I also realised now that I had wrecked my life in the name of money. Without Shanthi, my life was certainly meaningless, and practically impossible.

Having lost Shanthi, I spent the entire day in a lot of turmoil. The next day, at the time of class, Seetha showed me a

letter that she had received that morning by post. It was a letter from Shanthi.

'My dear friend Seetha,

'You would be in joy and my letter is one of sorrow, please forgive me! I would not have spoken of my sorrow to you, but I have no other friend in this world but you. And I have not taken any step without informing you about it. Father has arranged my marriage. The groom is older than my father, and I am the bride for his third marriage. He has four grand-daughters too. The boy who was selected last time rejected the proposal as my parents were unable to give dowry. Seetha, I am sure marrying this old man would make me no different from a corpse. I find it, therefore, better to kill myself instead. After all, would it not be a wise decision to go for the better of the two options?

'People say committing suicide is a sin. But if marrying of a young girl to an old man is an act of great merit, then too, I will prefer a sin to such a noble act.

'By the time you receive this letter, your unfortunate cousin would have departed from this world. I am sure at least you will not call me a sinner who committed suicide. Forgive me!'

Yours,
Shanthi

*

After reading Shanthi's letter, I cursed the rogue who demanded not just an angel like Shanthi, but a huge sum as dowry too. In the midst of my sorrow, I completely forgot that I too had once refused to marry a girl in the name of dowry. I cursed the Almighty. Yet, I felt within that if only I had kept aside my desire for money and gone ahead and married Shanthi, an innocent girl would have been happy now. I cursed myself for my mistake. How many innocent girls like Shanthi must have become victims of the practice of dowry! I too learnt of its devilish nature only after I lost my dear Shanthi.

That very night, I left for my village. When I reached home the next morning, Mother was cleaning the entrance to the house and drawing a rangoli. My father and Vi were inside. My

mother was delighted on seeing me and welcomed me back with a hug. I spoke to her and went into the house. My father was sitting in the hall, but did not speak to me even as I entered.

I went to my room. Vijaya was looking at a photograph, but immediately hid it, as I entered the room. She threw a newspaper at me and said, 'I was looking at the girl you killed!'

I was greatly surprised by her words. I pulled open the newspaper hurriedly. It was Shanthi's picture, with a note below: A victim of dowry.

Shanthi was the girl I had rejected!

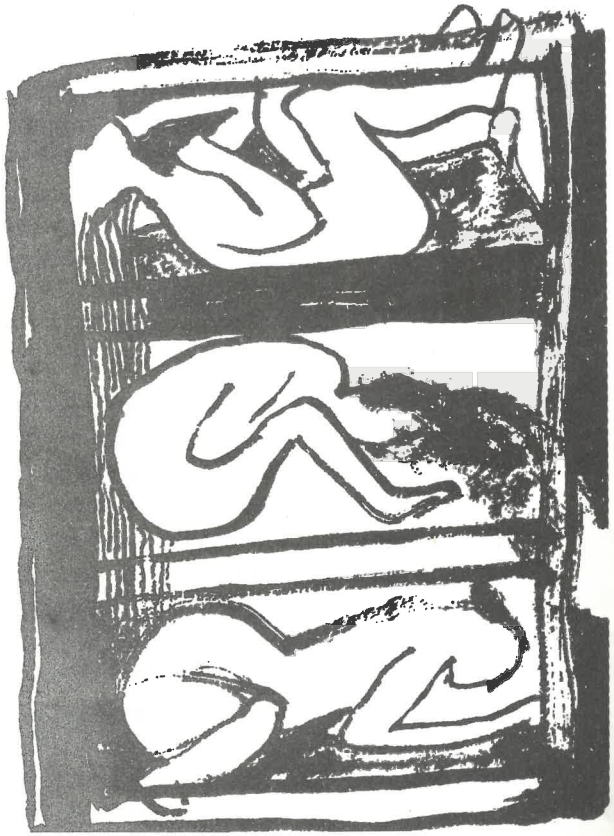
But, now...

Translated by
Chitra Phalguni

THE ORPHAN

H.V. Savitramma

H.V. Savitramma (1913-1995) wrote novels, short stories and did some very important translations. Her novels are *Seete, Rama, Ravana and Vimukti,* and *Nirashrite, Maru Maduve, Lakshmi Mattu Prateekshe* are some of her short story collections. She translated Rabindranath Tagore's into Kannada and some of them are *Mane-Jagattu, Gora,* and others.



Narasimhaiah was sitting on the raised platform situated in front of the house next door relishing the *chakkuli*[1] that Rajamma had given him. Wearing a shawl, Vishweshwaraiah was sitting beside him.

'Won't you eat Vishu?'

'I ate as she was frying. I have not counted how many I ate. It is still sitting in my stomach like a hard stone.'

'Whatever she does, Rajamma does it so well. *Chakkuli* seems to melt in my mouth.'

Vishweshwaraiah said loudly: 'Did you hear Raaju! Narasappa likes to have two more *chakkulis.*'

'No Maharaya![2] This itself is too much.'

Rajamma brought a plate full of *Chakkulis* and put two *chakkulis* into the plate of Narasimhaiah who was refusing to have any and placed the remaining ones by her husband's side and sat there beside him.

'What is this? Why are you giving it to me again? You must eat,' said Vishweshwaraiah, pushing the plate towards Rajamma.

'Anyway no one can prepare snacks like you Amma. Today I did not come only to eat snacks. I need a favour from you.'

'What is this Appa? As if we are strangers! Why are you beating around the bush so much? Tell me what is the matter.'

'I have seen a groom for our Subbi. The boy and his mother will come tomorrow on Sunday. Will you please come and...'

---

[1] A deep fried snack

[2] Literally means the great king but used in a sense of affectionate irony

'Do you have to ask me for that Narasappa? Is your Subbi different from our Lakshmi? We will certainly come. We will look after everything. Who is the groom?'

'The boy is studying in Bangalore. This time he is appearing for the B.Sc examination. He has apparently secured a first class in his intermediate examination. He is very brilliant. He is also handsome to look at.'

'His parents?'

'The boy has lost his father. They are not so affluent. There are only two people in the house: mother and son. Food and clothing is satisfactory. We must mainly think of the boy. I have no doubts that he shall prosper in life.'

'That is all Subbi's luck.'

There Subbi who was playing Gajjuga[3] with Lakshmi in front of the house neatly mopped with cow dung raised her head and looked at Rajamma.

Lakshmi said to Rajamma, 'What is that about Subbi's luck Amma? I have not seen it. She did not win a single game.'

Narasimhaiah felt uneasy. He was perturbed.

Rajamma: 'Just let it be. What if she loses in a game? She will find a husband who is like a king. You will only get a panganama[4]. Your father will sit primly wearing his shawl and the eligible grooms will parade in front of the house.'

Vishweshawaraiah was laughing. Narasimhaiah said, 'What does Lakshmi lack? The man who marries her should have performed meritorious acts to acquire a wife like her.'

Rajamma: 'This kind of arrogance is fine. But if he does not look around somewhere for eligible grooms, how will we get her married?'

Vishweshwaraiah: 'You look for a groom for our Lakshmi too Narasimhaiah. Let us celebrate their weddings together.'

Rajamma: 'He seems to have been possessed by evil spirits.'

---

[3] A game played with marbles made out of the seeds of a prickly climbing shrub.

[4] A large sprawling forehead mark, in this context it means to be tricked.

Narasimhaiah ate *chakkuli*, drank water, stood up and said, 'Then come on Sunday morning only Rajamma . The bus from Bangalore reaches by 10 a.m. itself.'

The game of marbles continued with a lot of enthusiasm. Narasimhaiah said to his daughter, 'Will you come home with me Subbi? It is already dark now.'

'Just this one game Appa. I will at least win this last game and come with you.'

In the night, Narasimhaiah spread his mattress next to his daughter's and slept beside her. His mind was in some kind of anxiety and turmoil. Subbi was two years old when her mother died. She might not have had any memories of her mother. From that day onwards Narasimhaiah became her mother and father. He was everything to her.

He would wake up in the morning, cook, after giving his daughter a bath, he would plait her hair and leave for school after having his lunch with her. Subbi spent the day in Rajamma's house till her father returned. When she was about five or six years old, he admitted her to school and brought her along to school too. After his wife's death, his daughter had become a part of his life, blending into the texture of his life itself. If she were to marry and leave the house, his life would be lonely. Narasimhaiah's spirit sagged. Subbi had grown up as a carefree girl. She had not known any discipline. If her face crumpled a little, Narasimhaiah's mind would cringe in pain. She had never toiled in the house. 'If her mother were alive, how much she might have mollycoddled her. What kind of a house she may belong to later who knows? Why must she be tortured from now onwards? Let her remain playful and carefree,' thus Narasimhaiah had brought her up. He would do all the work of a woman and a man himself. Once in a while, Rajamma would tell him: 'Don't mistake my words Narasappa. Girls must be adept at household chores. Even if she does not know anything, if she cannot at least cook rice, *huli* and *palya*, what will her plight be? See our Lakshmi. She does all the chores.' Tears would overflow from Narasimhaiah's eyes. 'She is an orphan who has lost her mother Rajamma. How can I make her toil, tell me. Tomorrow if she were to belong to a good house, her mother

in law herself would teach her everything.' Thus Narasimhaiah would conclude his talk. Rajamma would keep quiet.

Subbi was bored with household chores. She would always focus on playtime. Tomorrow would be her examination. It would be a test of her luck. Soon after reaching home, Narasimhaiah lit a lamp filled with ghee before the idol of the deity and implored to the almighty for his daughter's happiness.

At dawn Rajamma came to Narasimhaiah's house. She swept the entire house clean and set things in order. She draped a nice saree on Subbi and plaited her hair. 'The girl looks like Rati[5] herself. The man who marries her is fortunate,' Rajamma thought.

Subbi asked Rajamma 'Didn't Lakshmi come Atte?'

Narasimaiah also chimed in saying, 'Didn't the child come Rajamma?'

'Please be quiet Narasappa. There must be only one girl when the boy arrives and he must accept the match and should get married to her,' Rajamma said.

Around the time of Ramaiah and his mother's arrival Rajamma had finished preparing *Uppittu* and *Kesaribath* and was ready to receive them.

Subbi was not of an age to feel any coyness. She gazed at Ramaiah freely. After the conversation Sharadamma said, 'Give the horoscope of the girl. We will return to our city and thereafter send a letter.'

Narasimhaiah accepted the son-in-law. He was slim, tall and handsome. He handed over Subbi's horoscope to Shantamma and pleaded with her: 'Please uplift this humble man's house. Please accept the marriage proposal.'

Sharadamma replied: 'If it is destined to happen, it will,' and rose to leave. Narasimhaiah placed a plate full of fruits and coconut before her and said: 'It would be nice if you could stay for lunch and leave after having lunch.'

[5] The beautiful consort of Manmatha, the God of love

'Che, Che! People who come to see a girl must not stay back for lunch in her house. My sister's house is here. We will stay there and leave from there,' Sharadamma said and left.

*

Subbi was destined to belong to that house. When she married Ramaiah and entered his house as his bride, she was not old enough to understand the depth of her father's affection. When her father took leave of her in tears leaving her behind in her mother- in-law's house, she did not grieve as much as she had lamented while parting from her friend Lakshmi.

Ramaiah was a fiery tempered man. When he passed the B.Sc. examination securing the first place he had no doubts about facing any difficulty in finding a job. He looked around for a job in several places, grew dejected and joined a school nearby.

An intense dissatisfaction with his teacher's job as unsuitable to his educational status and ability was deeply rooted in his head. If he had married a rich man's daughter he could have pursued his education abroad and risen up to a higher post. The father's wealth was sufficient to meet the basic necessities but not enough to squander away. To hell with it! Ramaiah thought that employment was essential for acquiring respectability and decided to become a teacher. The children were the targets of his frustration in school and Subbi at home! The poor woman had not even known the meaning of words such as warmth and trust. She would toil from dawn to dusk without a word of appreciation. When Ramaiah sat down for lunch, Sharadamma would also sit down to eat. Subbi would serve them with her heart beating wildly.

'What is this? I saw you shelling so many horse grams, now there isn't a single piece left,' Sharamma would begin.

Ramaiah would stare at her gloweringly.

Subbi would serve everything to her husband and mother in law without keeping a single piece of vegetable for herself.

Ramaiah grumbled that the rice was too watery. Pushing the plate aside, washed his hands and left.

Sharadamma was silent till he left and then said: 'You have been cooking all these days. You still do not know how much water needs to be kept for making rice. He goes out to work but he does not even get to eat a full meal. I do not know whatmisfortune this is.'

Subbi wiped her eyes and covered the food she had cooked and came out of the kitchen. No one told her to eat. No one enquired why she had not eaten either.

*

Subbi was delighted when Rajamma and Lakshmi arrived suddenly. She felt as if the days of her childhood had returned. Sharadamma also found it impossible not to talk to Rajamma.

'Why does our Subbi look so emaciated? Don't you feed her adequately?' Rajamma asked laughing.

Sharadamma replied harshly, 'You can find out from her yourself.'

Rajamma became aware of the situation although she did not show it and remarked: 'Your father has been announcing happily to everybody that you are the daughter- in-law of rich people's household! But why have you become like this?'

Sharadamma cheered up a little when she heard Rajamma describe them as rich people and said: 'She is three months pregnant now. Since she has morning sickness she looks like this'.

Delighted by this revelation Rajamma asked: 'Is that so? Her father did not even inform us.'

'We have not informed him yet. What is the hurry?' replied Sharadamma, evasively.

Lakshmi grew bored with this conversation. 'Come Subbi,' she called her friend rising from there. Both of them sat in the backyard relishing the snacks which Rajamma had brought.

Lakshmi asked Subbi, 'Why Subbi you have become so vain after marriage that you have not visited your hometown?'

Subbi. 'How can I come Lakshmi?'

'What do you mean? You must box your husband's ears and tell him you shall visit your hometown and come back.'

Subbi's heart trembled. Boxing Ramaiah's ears! She could not even imagine that. If he were to look at her sharply, Subbi's tongue would dry up.

Lakshmi, 'Let us not talk about it. Will you come to my wedding or not?'

'Your wedding! Rajamma did not even tell me. When? Who is the bridegroom?' Subbi showered her friend with questions.

Lakshmi, 'Amma was silent because she wanted me to tell you. My wedding is on the twelfth of next month. You will come, won't you?'

'I will see.'

'There is no question of seeing. If you don't come, I shall never talk to you.'

'No, I will come. What does your fiancé do?'

'He is also from Bengaluru. He has a clinic of his own.'

'Then you will also come here. You can look for a house near our house. Let us start our game of marbles like before.'

Both of them laughed and rose. After going inside Subbi took Rajamma to task. 'What is this Rajamma ? Couldn't you tell me that Lakshmi's wedding is coming up?'

'She said she would tell you herself.'

Subbi pinched Lakshmi.

Sharadamma asked Rajamma to stay back for lunch since it was customary to say so. But Rajamma did not accept her invitation. Neither did Subbi insist. When Subbi came out to see them off Rajamma said softly: 'We will inform your father and send for you quickly. You must come.' At the door outside she ran into Ramaiah. Rajamma enquired after his well-being. He gave a terse reply muttering 'hmmm' and went inside. Having understood the situation a little Rajamma said 'I will take leave now,' and left.

Subbi placed a plate of *avalakkiunde, chakkuli* and *kobbarimithayi* before Ramaiah who was reading the newspaper in the front room. Ramaih frowned at her and said: 'I do not want all of this. Bring me coffee.'

When Subbi brought him coffee in a hurry, Ramaiah said angrily, 'Can't you bring me some hot coffee at least?' and banged the coffee cup on the table.

Overcome by fear Subbi said, 'I will serve it hot' and went inside. By the time she returned Ramaiah was not even there in the house.

*

Ramaiah himself had read a couple of letters that Narasimhaiah had written to his daughter and had torn them to shreds. Subbi did not even get to know about her father. A couple of days after Rajamma had left, Subbi was hopeful that father might visit and take her away. But as the days passed even that hope faded away. She had not even turned towards her mother's house since her marriage. Having learnt from Rajamma that his daughter was pregnant, Narasimhaiah wrote a letter to his daughter and son in law, but Subbi did not even get a hint of this.

Finally on one fine day.Narasimhaiah himself knocked on their door. When Subbi opened the door she could not believe her own eyes. 'At last you have comeAppa,' she said and wept torrentially.

Just as Narasimaiah asked her: 'Are you well my dear?' the door opened and Ramaiah entered.

Subbi shrank in terror as if she had seen a snake and went inside.

Since Narasimhaiah was well acquainted with the ways of his son-in-law from the earliest days of the marriage, he entered the house rather hesitantly.

He saw Sharadamma and enquired about her health. He pretended not to have noticed the terse replies and said, 'Rajamma told me that Subbi is in the seventh month of her

pregnancy. If you can send her now, I will send her back after the birth of the baby.'

Sharadamma said: 'There is no other woman in that house. So let her remain here.'

'I will appoint a maidservant. I will look after her. She has not visited even once after marriage. I will send her back three months after her delivery. She is all I have.' Ramaiah pleaded with her.

Sharadamma said harshly, 'You can ask my son yourself.'

Narasimhaiah went to his son in law's room. Facing the wall Ramaiah was reading a book while lying down on the bed. He did not even turn and look around although he was aware the elderly man had entered his room. He did not rise up either. If Narasimhaiah were not reminded of his daughter standing at the kitchen door looking forlorn, he would not have stayed a moment longer in that house.

'Can I take Subbi to my house for delivery?'

Ramaiah did not utter a word.

Narasimhaiah 'I will bring her back after the delivery.'

'Ask my mother.'

'She told me to ask you.'

'What is the hurry now?'

'She will shortly complete seven months. Let her spend a few days in her mother's house.'

'I have made arrangements for her delivery here.'

'Let her at least stay with me for a few days under this pretext.' Narasimhaiah implored his son in law in a pathetic manner.

'Not now.'

Seeing his son in law's face Narasimhaiah realized that pleading with his son in law was futile. Heaving a heavy sigh he came out of the room.

Struggling to swallow even a morsel of rice, he ate with great difficulty and slept on the raised platform in front of the house on a mat. Subbama finished her chores and came and sat beside her father.

'Can't you sleep inside Appa?'

'It is cool here dear. Please go to bed.'

Subbamma was weeping silently.

'Please sleep dear. If you get exhausted, it will spoil your health. You can come to your hometown after the delivery carrying your infant son.'

Subbamma wiped her eyes. She brought a shawl from inside and covered her father with it.

When Narasimhaiah did not talk for a long time, Subbamma presumed that her father had fallen asleep and went in. As his tear drops fell on the pillow, Narasimhaiah was looking at the stars twinkling in the sky. There was no mother to pine for the daughter: or where was the necessity to grieve? Subbi did not lack clothing and food. 'Let me leave her to her destiny and suppress my selfishness. Then she will not suffer any misery.' Thinking thus Narasimhaiah decided not to show his pain. It was her house, her life . He did not have any role to play in her life. After helping her cross the frontiers of her childhood, his duty was over, Narasimhaiah thought.

The next day, he got ready for the journey before everyone woke up. Subbamma rose early and prepared coffee. Narasimhaiah was pretending to be cheerful although he did not feel so and asked his daughter, 'Then will you come to your hometown carrying your little son my mother?' and stroked her cheeks affectionately.

Subbamma replied: 'You come here at that time Appa.' She was weeping.

'Why won't I come? Won't I bring a gold waist band for my grandson's naming ceremony?' said Narasimhaiah.

He took leave of his son in law who had just then come out after washing his face and also took leave of his daughter's mother in law.

Subbamma stood at the door watching her father leave. Although it was only eight in the morning, it was scorching hot. Narasimhaiah with his tiny bundle of clothes, wiped his head with the kerchief and placed the turban on his head. Tears were flowing in Subbamma's eyes. 'Poor father. It is so hot already; I should have sent for a bullock cart,' thought Subbamma. As she looked on, Narasimhaiah turned back

once, waved at his daughter and disappeared around a bend in the road.

Subbamma heaved a deep sigh and went inside the house. She did not see her father again. When she came to know that her father was ailing and had a fever, she was full term pregnant. Her father passed away without even seeing the face of his grandson. Since there were no other children, Ramaiah became the sole heir to his father in law's property. Although he had never crossed the threshold of his father in law's house even once after marriage, now he had to enter that house for claiming his property. But Subbamma did not enter that town again.

She was very keen on attending Lakshmi's wedding .When she asked her husband, she got a reply that it was 'unnecessary'. She asked her mother in law's permission. Her mother in law said to her son 'Ramu, It seems your wife wants to go to her hometown' redirecting the decision to her son. Looking at Ramaiah's tightly knitted brows and his stern face Subbamma cooled down. Lakshmi had also written her a letter of four pages raising objections to her absence at her wedding. She had also sent a photo of herself and her husband. He was a handsome boy who seemed to be smiling at Lakshmi. Subbi felt as if her heart was tightly squeezed and her sighs mingled with the wind. She could not even remember a single episode when Ramaiah had laughed. 'What have I gained by always fearing him, what wealth has Ramaiah gained by frightening me?' Subbi thought.

*

When Subbaraya was born, Subbi's memories of her father had not faded yet. Her father had promised her that he would bring a 'gold waistband' for the grandson. Subbaraya was exactly like his father to look at. Sharadamma carried the baby and when she said, 'He looks exactly like how you looked when you were a baby', Subbi gazed at her husband and her heart bloomed in anticipation. She was not disillusioned despite her experiences all these days. There

was a glimmer of hope in her that Ramaiah's heart might melt after seeing his son's face and he might soften towards her. But there was no change in Ramaiah. Recuperating a month after the childbirth, Subbamma went back to her daily grind.

Subbi came to know in a short span of time that Subbu not only resembled his father in his appearance but also in his personality traits. He showed the same kind of rage and stubbornness. He never yielded to love and affection. The child quickly realized that the grandmother was the mistress of the house and his father the master of the household and his mother Subbi had no powers in the house. The little boy felt that his mother existed only to serve the three of them. This outlook strengthened over a period of time. Subbu neither respected nor loved his mother. He was afraid of his father. Therefore all his affection was channelized towards his grandmother, his sense of commitment towards the father.

He needed his Ajji (grandmother) when he had to bathe or eat. He would sleep next to his Ajji in the night. In the beginning Subbamma was thrilled to find that her mother-in-law loved her son so much. She felt that her mother-in-law may develop feelings of admiration towards her. But she realized very quickly that her son grew distant from her. Like those early days, her life continued on a single track. She would toil in the kitchen the entire day without any appreciation. Even a small mistake would assume a monstrous shape in the eyes of her husband and mother in law. They would also turn into veritable devils.

*

One night while spreading the mattress in the bedroom, Subbamma overheard Ramaiah talking with his mother.

'If he passes the examination this time, I will get Subbu enrolled for appearing in the examination for the medical degree course.'

'Why won't he pass? He will secure a first class in the examination,' said Sharadamma.

Subbamma's heart swelled up with pride. Why wouldn't Subbupass? He would certainly pass.

When Ramaiah entered the room, she summoned all her courage and asked him 'Did you come to know about Subbu's examination results?'. When Ramaiah did not even pay attention to her talks and asked for the newspaper, lying down on his bed, Subbamma handed over the newspaper to him and sat there. Ramaiah turned his back towards her and started reading the newspaper.

Again Subbamma asked him timidly: 'Did Subbu pass the examination?'

When Ramaiah replied 'he will' in disdain, Subbamma silently fell on her mattress. Before her tears could dry up, her exhausted body found its refuge in slumber.

Subbu's grandmother passed away before he became a doctor. After the death of her mother-in-law, Subbamma did not acquire any of her powers. She did not have a share in any of the conversations that transpired between the father and the son. From dawn to dusk, she would slog over endless preparation of snacks, coffee and lunch like a bullock in an oilmill. Gradually, even her interest to talk with them dried up.

Subbamma did not have to run around for her son's wedding either. Rajararaya showed the horoscope of his only daughter Anasuya to Ramaiahand after giving his acceptance, one day Ramaiah said to Subbamma, 'Be ready in the afternoon. We will go to see a bride for Subbu.' Subbamma asked him 'Who is the girl?' in curiosity. When Ramaiah did not give an answer, Subbaraya said to his mother 'You shall see'. When Subbamma came to know that she was Rajaraya's daughter, she felt very happy. Rajarayaru is an affluent man, courteous and refined,Anasuya is a beautiful, educated girl. There would be another woman with me at home thought Subbamma and her heart swelled up with joy. But after the '*gruhapravesha*' Subbamma came to know that the daughter in law did not come to their house but her son went to live in his mother-in-law's house.

Subbamma tried to reason with her son a couple of times.

'Let Anasuya stay in our house for a few days Subbu.'

'Her mother is not well. She cannot leave her mother alone and come here. Besides, she will not be able to adjust to this household either.'

'What is the problem?'

'I do not know. She does not like it here.'

Ramaiah was also disgruntled. But he did not reveal his feelings before his son. Nor did he share them with his wife.

When Subbamma suggested to him, 'Couldn't you at least tell her?'

Ramaiah harshly, 'What should I say?'

Subbamma, 'Shouldn't the daughter in law stay in our house for a few days?'

'If she wants to do that, she will come.'

'If you call her once, she will come.'

Ramaiah mimicked her sarcastically and said, 'Tomorrow I will carry an *Akashate Battalu*[6] and go to her house to extend her a formal invitation.'

'Can I go and call her?'

'You can also go there if you like. If you go there, you shall not step into this house again,' roared Ramaiah in displeasure. Subbamma kept quiet.

Ramaiah did not set foot in his daughter in law's father's house even once. He did not invite them to his house either. When the first grandson was born, Rajarayaru himself came to their house and invited them to the naming ceremony of the baby. Ramaiah did not even talk to him nor did he attend the naming ceremony.

Subbu came home in the evening and raged and ranted before his mother.

'He is such a prominent man. Both of you insulted him. He was so embarrassed because of that.'

'Aren't you aware of his obstinacy Subbu ? Shouldn't he show the desire to see his grandson at least?' said Subbamma. Subbaraya left the house in such fury without even inviting his mother to his house.

[6] Whole grains of raw rice dipped in water, kumkum and turmeric. Used for ceremonious welcome.

A couple of days later when Ramaiah was not around in the house, Subbamma went to her Beegara Mane[7]. Her beegitti[8] Sharadamma welcomed her with warmth. Subbamma carried her grandson with great joy and tied the gold waistband that Subbaraya had worn in his childhood around her grandson's waist.

When Subbaraya returned in the evening, Anasuya said to her husband 'Mother in law had come today.' As he was preoccupied with his own thoughts Subbaraya perhaps did not realize that she was referring to his mother. Seeing that husband was quiet, Anasuya also did not pursue the matter further.

Subbamma was greatly perturbed. She languished over the separation from her only son. She also felt pity for Ramaiah who suffered anguish in his heart of hearts. She knew that although Ramaiah was not interested in her, he had a keen interest in his son's prosperity. Shouldn't Subbaraya show some filial love towards his father? Did he regard his father in law's house more highly? What if his father in law was affluent? Would he become greater than us? Can't he at least as a respectable elderly person, a man well aware of things, educate his son-in-law about ethics and the ways of the world? She couldn't open her mouth about this with anyone. She kept her grief within herself. She did not have the courage to show compassion to her husband. Neither did she have the liberty to say a few words to Subbaraya.

However she made an effort once. She asked Ramaiah, 'Can I speak to daughter in law once?'

'Which daughter in law?' asked Ramaiah with his eyes bursting open.

'Why do you talk like this?'

'If they feel the obligation, they will come to my funeral ceremony. Why don't you shut up and mind your business?'

[7] The house of in laws

[8] A female relative by marriage.

Subbamma regretted for provoking her husband and forcing sinister utterances from his mouth and kept quiet.

Days just went by, disappearing into the womb of time. Although in the absence of her son, without her husband's knowledge, Subbamma went a couple of times to see her grandson, she did not feel joyous about it. It was not as if she did not realize that her daughter in law and her mother looked at her with contempt and condescension. When her own people were not affectionate towards her, how could she expect that from others? Subbamma thought and heaved a heavy sigh.

Ramaiah's ominous utterances came true. Her son and daughter in law set foot in the house only after hearing the news of his death. Leaning against the wall near the door Subbamma sat staring at the horizon. She did not find the necessity to talk to whoever came and went. This was her first experience of death of someone closest to her. She did not have any memories of her mother at all. She had not even visited her natal home when her father had passed away. Now Ramaiah was no more. That voice which made her tremble had merged into infinite silence forever. Subbamma's heart trembled. She was also not far away from death. Life had lost its equilibrium and the humdrum, quotidian concerns of life had turned wearisome. Death is inevitable for all people. Subbamma was lost in her gloomy thoughts.

Her neighbor Rangamma came and sat beside Subbamma and heaved a sigh.

'How unfair Subbamma. I cannot believe that a man like Ramaiah passed away.'

Subbamma also said: 'When he retired to bed, he was fine Rangamma. I did not even know when he stopped breathing,' reacting in a typical manner.

'Very sad, Very sad indeed! A virtuous soul. Don't they say that the proof of one's virtue lies in one's death?'

Subbamma did not comprehend whose virtue was a testimony to Ramaiah's death.

'Will you go with you son now?'

Subbamman deeply perturbed asked 'Where?'. Whether Ramaiah pampered her or upbraided her, that house was hers. She was independent there. If she were to leave the house and go somewhere else it would not be her place. But that was a rented house. Now that Ramaiah was no more, who would pay the rent? Would Subbaraya pay the rent? Subbamma was in turmoil again. Where could she go? This significant question haunted her.

Rangamma said, 'Poor dear! Where can you go? You have only one son. You will have to go with him.'

Subbamma, 'But he is there in his father in law's house!'

Rangamma, 'That is why I asked you. Now he may set up another household.'

Subbamma did not say anything. She remembered Ramaiah's words and her body trembled. 'If you go there, you shall not step into this house again.' Ramaiah had lived up to his words. He had not set foot in the house of his son's in laws. Not even to look at his grandson! But I am a woman. Will it be possible for me to live like how he did? Perhaps I could live like that. If I work in few houses, I might get food and clothing. But what would I gain by distancing my only son? What is that I need? One meal a day is it not? Let God's will prevail, Subbamma thought.

Having finished his father's cremation Subbaraya came and sat beside his mother. He had never sat beside her like that. Subbamma did not feel like talking. The idea that he could share her sorrow had not even occurred to her. He had grown distant even when his father was alive. She had never known her son intimately. She had not heard a single word of compassion or endearment from Ramaiah. Still it was a co-existence of a lifetime. After the departure of Ramaiah, she felt that she did not have any support.

Subbaraya finally said, 'Appa never saw the child till the end.' Subbamma was quiet.

'My father in law was very upset.'

'Didn't you know his nature Subbu? Couldn't you and Anasuya have come once to the house carrying your child and shown him the grandchild?'

'Yes, it was all my fault' sulked Subbaraya.

'It is not your fault Subbu. But someone must yield. If both of you remain equally stubborn ...'

'You should have said so.'

'I did tell him. I pleaded with him to send for you. But he was also stubborn.'

'You should have told me.'

'Are you an innocent child Subbu? After going to your father in law's house, you did not come near even once. You did not sit beside me, nor did you talk to me. How useful are such thoughts now?'

The mother and the son stopped their conversation when Anasuya came in carrying the child.

*

Subbamma could not adjust to that house even after six months. It wasn't really a house. It had a room and a bathroom. It was almost like an appendage to Rajaraya's house. She would eat when the cook brought her food and would spend her time sitting the entire day. When she entered the house newly, she felt it would be a good idea if she could cook her meals herself. So she also arranged for a few utensils.

When Anasuya remarked: 'It is an unnecessary expense. Why should one person cook so much', Subbaraya spoke to his mother firmly.

'Amma, don't start cooking here. It will spoil the appearance of this room. They do not like it. When there is a cook why should you take the trouble?' he said.

Perhaps Subbamma would have felt good if Subbaraya had only uttered the last sentence referring to the cook. 'They do not like it!' So she had to live in accordance with their wishes. At least Ramaiah considered her as someone who belonged to him. Subbaraya did not have any feelings towards her. Subbamma became silent.

She felt that she could spend her time by playing with her grandchild. So she went inside the house a couple of times. But her son's mother in law did not even invite her to sit

down nor did she talk to her. Her daughter in law curtly said, 'The child is asleep,' and left. Subbamma did not try again. She would complete her morning routine and sit near the door. When the lunch arrived, like a beggar woman she would eat without the sound of any kind words such as, 'Did you eat? Does it taste good? Why don't you eat a little more?' etc. She would pass the time counting the hours. Even when Ramaiah was alive Subbamma ate alone. Even during those days no one cared to enquire about her. But it was her house. She ate the food that she had cooked herself. Sometimes, Subbamma thought if she had paid more attention to her studies while her father was alive, she could have spent her time by reading books at least. But these days she could not see properly. Cataract was growing in both her eyes. Subbamma would shiver at thought of growing completely blind.

*

When Lakshmi came home looking for her Subbamma was overjoyed. She had not met her since a very long time.

'How did you come here so suddenly Lakshmi?'

'Why shouldn't I visit you Subbi? I have not seen you since ages. So much has happened in these years. The childhood period is so much better isn't it Subbi?' Memories of those times rolled over Subbi's mind as well.

'Why did you come to Bengaluru now?'

'I suppose you know that my husband started his medical practice in Mysore, don't you?'

Subbamma was not aware of anything.

'How many children do you have?'

'Two. I had written you? Have you forgotten? The eldest one is Shankara. He is also a doctor. Father and the son do their medical practice together. Our Sundari's husband is also a doctor. He lives in this city. My husband and I have come here to participate in the celebration of her son's birthday. She will come and invite you too. You also must come.'

'How can I come Lakshmi? I am unable to see properly either.'

'Tell me when had you seen things clearly? You are still a child. Let it be. My son in law will bring the car. Do come. By the way, where is your grandson?'

She called the gardener who was wandering around there and said, 'Please tell Anasuya that they want to see the child' to him.

Before the gardener disappeared, Nataraja was moving aside in the direction of his grandmother. He had not learnt to walk yet! He wasn't crawling either. He was trying to move around in a sitting position.

Lakshmi, 'See, your grandson has come here,' she said, carrying him.

Subbamma fondled the child. She stroked his head. 'Did you come here yourself darling?' she asked her grandson and hugged him. Looking at the tears overflowing from her eyes, Lakshmi realized that her grandson was also inaccessible and rarely available for Subbi. She placed the bananas and *kallusakkare*[9] that she had brought along with her there and said, 'I shall take leave of you Subbi. Don't miss the birthday celebration. Do bring your daughter in law as well' and left.

Subbamma was blissfully unaware of this world altogether. She sat him down on her lap and put a piece of *kallusakkare* that Lakshmi had brought for her in his mouth. She stroked his waist to check if he was wearing the waist band that she had given him. When she did not find it she thought, 'It is good if the child is adorned with jewellery.'

'Maali(gardner), where is the child?' Anasuya came there screaming. 'Here he is, the little thief. He has come searching for his grandmother,' said Subbamma to her daughter in law.

'Thoo, what rubbish are you eating,' said Anasuya, and removed the piece of *kallusakkare* from his mouth.

[9] Crystal sugar

'It is nothing. I put a little sugar in his mouth' said Subbamma. Before she could even complete the sentence, Anasuya remarked rudely, 'It doesn't go well with him' and left carrying her bawling child.

Subbamma felt tired of life. She kept the banana inside and lit the lamp. Lakshmi is a lucky woman. Her son works along with her husband. She has a daughter to comfort her and give her solace. The son in law is also a doctor. He has invited his mother in law and father in law for his son's birthday. He may have invited his parents as well. Subbi had forgotten to ask Lakshmi. Nataraja would also complete his first year soon. On the occasion of Subbaraya's first birthday, her mother in law had invited the entire town and distributed sweets. Ramaiah was so excited about his son's future. He had hoped that his son would become a doctor and his crutch for his old age. But he had said, 'If he feels the obligation, he will come to my funeral ceremony' before dying.

Subbamma felt that she was not well educated; she did not know how to mingle with others and did not have conversational skills. Perhaps that was why Ramaiah was disappointed with her and lost his temper so frequently! Or was it his nature! What mattered was what she got.

*

It was twilight and soon it would be dark. Subbamma was standing near the door. Inside in a corner before the calendar of the deity, two lamps were glowing. She could hear the voice of Subbaraya from that house. 'He has come early today. Perhaps they may go out somewhere,' Subbamma thought. As she sat down, she heard the sound of the car in front of the door. Subbamma called out for the gardener.

'What do you want Avva?'

'Who went in the car?'

'All of them.'

'Did Subbaraya also go?'

'No Avva.'

'Will you ask him to come here?'

The gardener went away. Subbamma sat waiting. It grew very dark. She got up and switched on the light. But her mind did not brighten up. There lurked some unknown fear, an anxiety. She came out again. Subbaraya was standing at the door.

'You called me I believe?'

'Sit down Subbu,' said Subbamma moving towards the mat. Subbaraya sat down and said 'All of them went to watch a play.'

'I thought you had also gone.'

'I was bored. I also had a headache. Take this banana and the grapes,' said Subbaraya handing over the fruits to his mother.

Subbamma's heart was overflowing. Wasn't he her own biological son? Hadn't she given birth to him? Who else did she have other than him?

'Why do you have a headache? Can't you have an oil bath?'

Rising from his seat Subbaraya said 'Don't switch on the light for too long in the night. This time, the electricity bill was very steep,' and left.

Subbamma switched off the light. But she could not sleep. There were so many memories. In childhood while playing Lakshmi had remarked 'I have not seen her being lucky.' It turned out to be true indeed. The drama of her life would also come to an end shortly. She remembered her father's warmth, Rajamma's affection and Lakshmi's friendship. Once upon a time her life was also blissfully green. Although she was unaware of anything when she got married, all the elders were overjoyed at the prospect of her bright, happy future. No one knew how sterile and empty her life was going to be. She felt as if her father was sitting beside her and stroking her head and broke down sobbing like a small child. Then Ramaiah! Although he was a harsh man, she did not face any difficulties as long as he was alive. Overcome by fear, she was dispirited. But it seemed to her that enduring Ramaiah's tantrums was better than putting up with this lonely life she was leading in the

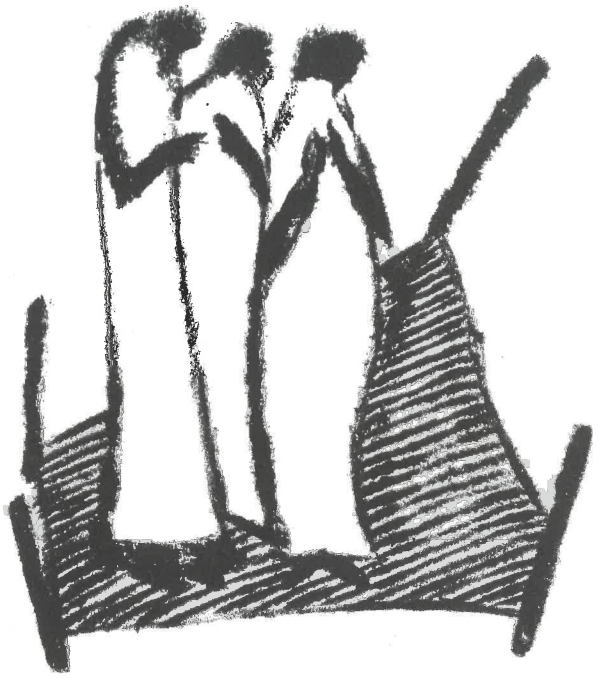
present. Her daughter in law's mother would not come and look her up even once a day. When her own son neglected her, how could she sit pining for her daughter in law's affection? Wouldn't it be futile? She was not even entitled to fondling her own grandchild. Covering herself with the blanket, Subbamma wept inside the blanket. When she felt as though darkness was enveloping her eyes, Subbamma switched on the light. The bulb flickered for a while before it went off again. Subbamma screamed in terror like a mad woman. She caught hold of the door latch in order to open the door and shout for help. She could not open the door with her trembling hands. She banged the door screaming. No one heard. No one came. Her body was soaking wet in perspiration. She felt as if the ghosts were dancing around her. She let out a shriek and collapsed on the floor, never to rise again.

Translated by
K.S. Vaishali

A QUARTER-PENNY COIN

Devangana Shastri

Devangana Shastri (1925-51) was a prodigious talent. Her formal education was very limited, but in a letter that her brother Ganapathi Shastry writes to her, he says that her literary knowledge was on par with a post graduate. A voracious reader, Devangana was of progressive temperament, and never hesitated to express her dissent to social happenings. She died at 25 years of age, after child birth, and noted poet Ram. Shri. Mugali writes in an article for Sahitya Academy that it was a 'big loss' for Kannada literature.



Sitting in a corner of the courtyard, the three of us, my sister, brother-in-law and I, spread the board for a game of dice to beat the sultry afternoon's boredom. My sister was bent on getting her husband's Sunday to be spent in playing dice. He was an expert in matters of clerical work, but was butterfingered when it came to games like this. My sister, on the contrary, was a true cardsharp in dice. As always, the intricacies of the game escaped him and very soon, fearing defeat, he was irritated and began searching for an excuse to quit the game.

'What kind of a game is this? There is no fun in you cheating me and winning all the time'. He was really upset about this. His screwed up face betrayed a wronged man's pride. My sister tried entreating him.

'Come on, you can't quit the game half way through. You have to finish it. Anyway, where would you want to go now?' she said winking at me who was sitting by her side. He did not notice the joke, and was still livid when he spoke.

'What else is left? There are two pawns surviving and you will kill them anyway. I would rather...'

My sister stole his words, and continued with a winning smile, 'Rather finish the game right away, wouldn't you?' He was now so humiliated that he turned his back to her and walked away saying, 'I can't spend my whole day on a game of dice. Not that I mind a fair game. This is not even that, isn't it Venu?' he asked me trying to enlist me on his side.

'Your sister always does this. She cheats right under my nose. How would I ever win with her? If I knew that she is the type who finds joy in defeating her husband, I wouldn't have ever married her. I really feel like I was cheated on this count.' His words didn't fail to kindle my sister's ire. She retorted saying, 'oh well, if it is so cumbersome, why not just disentangle the knot'. He had his retorts ready. Almost as if

he had thought about it beforehand, he replied loudly. 'I have already started disentangling it.'

My sister was looking intently at her unyielding husband when she said, 'the girl who has moved in recently to the street below, she is no stranger, is she? Someone said, she is our Nagappayya's daughter Sumati...' Her husband's taunts seemed to have brought forth an opposite effect in her. Her eyes were flaring when she wrung the dice board away from the floor. She resolutely kept her head low while she collected all the pawns and walked briskly away from the room. Her husband's sister, Sarasu attige, was sitting in a corner making cotton lamp wicks; a woman who had seen many stories of loose talk ruining families in her long years. She could not hold back from chiding her brother.

'Couldn't you have simply gone out somewhere instead of beginning this fight? Why make your tasteless jokes with these girls and ruin their happiness. By the way, that girl, Sumati, who had run away...?' She had many questions to ask, but her brother signaled her to stop when he saw my sister come back from the room. Sarasu attige was quick to sense it and started talking about her lamp wicks. My sister was encouraged by the support she had received from this quarter, so just before leaving to fetch water, she took up the broken thread of the conversation. 'Attige, I am bent on defeating anybody in dice. But she is the one who did that with her life too, isn't it? I suppose your brother would have loved all his victories if he had tied the knot to her then.' She darted out of the courtyard briskly, but her face betrayed anger. The violent crash of her toe-rings against the floor was ample proof that there was a whirlwind rising in her mind. I suppose my brother-in-law sensed something of this. He stood up saying to no one in particular, 'let us all go to a movie today. Let me spur your sister a little.'

2

I was still sitting at the same place where we were playing until now. My sister was preparing a snack restively as if that

would help her anger. The pranks played by my brother-in-law during the dice game, the curiosity of his sister in figuring out the name of that person, her interest in gathering more details about her, the way he silenced her when he saw my sister coming out; all of this told me that this was about someone in particular. I kept to myself until he was around. No sooner did he he slip into his shoes walked out of the gate, I came and sat close to Sarasa attige and broached this topic. Initially she was reluctant to share it; the virtuous woman in her feared the vulgarities in it. My insistence would push her to sin but she was also on her toes to share it with someone.

'Venu, those days, we womenfolk were always bound to the house. But when I heard that this girl was from my place, I was ashamed about myself. There is nothing but sin to be gained in talking about the likes of her. She is the youngest daughter of Nagappayya. He is from my town. Even as a baby, she had an evil charm around her. Both her parents died young. She had two sisters, older to her by a few years. Both of them were married and lived in their husband's houses. Her uncle Timmayya had no children. He married her off to someone hoping that by the virtue of gving the girl awa, he will get a child for the family. For the witch that she was, she didn't give birth to another like her. Her barrenness was her only help to us. Her husband was a poor soul. Their station in life was not bad either. But her brother-in-law, that is, her husband's brother, was a letch. He had had his share of sin in life by then. But as soon as this one entered their house, all his vices came back to him. His wicked eye fell on his brother's wife too. She was a charmer herself. Being the master of the house, why would he let go of this easy catch? But then, any simpleton would know when someone snatches away what is theirs. After all, jealousy and hatred flare up easily. But the younger one was not capable of opposing the elder brother even if he knew what was happening behind his back. Without any go, he left the house himself. She was also at her wit's end with the elder one hankering after her. She had come to stay for a few days at whatever remained of her

parent's house. But when she went back, the elder brother was livid because suddenly she was not available for his needs. He made that an excuse and threw her out of her husband's house. She was no paragon of virtue herself, and the new homelessness only gave her an opportunity to go seeking for more. She spent her days working as a domestic help in nearby houses. Vagrant men wouldn't let her be once they knew that she had no one to protect her. So, she had to join as a cook in a well-established household. But as her ill luck would have it, the man of that house also cast his evil eye on her. He made her work hard for him and then also put his violent hand out on her, ruined her and threw her out. Just then someone who was into witchcraft found her. His charm worked. Already she had the hum of the street in her head. She just upped and left with him. I don't know what happened after. It was only now when your sister and brother-in-law were talking that I heard about Sumati again. But who wouldn't err in life? It's just that her one mistake gave way to a thousand others.'

Sarasa attige was heaving breathlessly at the end of this long tale. Who is the woman who will not have her pride? When you hear a tale of shame about someone from your own village, it is but natural to feel offended. The anger which began with the dishonor that befell the lot of womenfolk came down in the next moment with this story of grief, making Sarasa attige melancholic. We could not talk anymore due to the heaviness that descended on us. But Sumati's life which looked horrible a moment ago now appeared like a tale of woes. I was moved to tears and felt like I needed to be on her side.

'But attige, has someone asked about the circumstances which brought her to this end? Your brother has made this a funny tale to help his boredom. I wonder what other indulgences they have to while away their time...' If I did not hear the footsteps at the end of the corridor, I would have definitely got a beating or two from my brother-in-law. He was no stranger to the pride that lodged in all men. Would it have let him ignore my impertinence?

'Venu, let's all go to the movie. This is a Hindi film. Our Sunday can then be declared fully done away with. Get ready all of you,' he said, and started hurrying us. Sarasa attige meekly said, 'I could have come along if it was Kannada. All of you can go.' The three of us started walking towards the movie theatre.

3

It was late into the night when we came out of the movie hall. Just as he was getting out, he asked for a translation of the title of the film: 'The Life That Is'. I was still immersed in the tragic tale of the movie even though we had already started walking back. It was a story written by a big Russian author; a tale where a woman is forced to sell herself. The pathos and heartrending depictions were really touching. We were ruminating about it even as we walked home. My brother-in-law was left behind by a few steps as he got chatting with a friend. The two of us walked ahead. Abruptly, my sister tugged at my plait and said, 'Venu, look at the woman sitting there. She is the same Sumati about whom your brother-in-law was making those comments when we were playing'. I wiped my misty eyes and stood gazing at her askance. My curiosity took the better of me. The moonlight was bright as if one could read and write under its glow. Her silhouette was distinctly visible. It was a grass-thatched hut which would have hit someone's forehead if they stood erect. There she is, a woman clad in white, sitting by the rampart, cleaning the lamp wicks, lost to herself. A man who was buying some beedis across the road came and stood beside her with an air of acquaintance. He threw a quarter-penny coin towards her saying yesterday's without any heed for the money. The coin glittered in the glowing flame of the lamp. She said something to him but only the sound of her calm voice was audible. She then took the coin from the floor and knotted it into the hem of her sari. The pain in her face at that moment seemed to say 'I would rather this were a bomb than a coin that I am touching'. Even as she, crushed and embittered by life, took

the lamp in her hand and turned into the door, a draught of wind blew out the lamp. The feet of the man standing by the ramparts had already taken a step into the hut. It appeared like the coin he had given her liberally was given after its worth was made good. Standing at a distance and looking at all this, I felt like the character in the movie was walking around in flesh and blood. My sister saw her husband join us and said in jest, lightening the situation, 'Why take the effort of coming all the way? You could as well go inside there, isn't it?' With a hint of fear, he sensed that the joke from the morning had really turned sour and was still making her smart in anger. He removed a little ribbon of jasmines from his pocket and gave it in her hand and tried to woo her, 'are you serious? Where would I go when my life is here next to me?' His charm had already begun its work on my sister and her face eased into a glad smile. But somewhere deep inside me, Sumati's story was gnawing at my soul even after we had reached home. She had fallen into the very depths of misery. Even if she wanted to come out of that ditch, and even if I wanted to stretch my hand bravely to her, I was unsure whether it would reach her. Only her faint wails were visible from that depth. What could one do other than look ruefully?

Translated by
Ashwin Kumar A.P.

EXCERPTS FROM TWO STORIES OF TRIVENI

Triveni

Triveni, Anusuya Shankar (1928-63) — One of the best short story writers of this period, Triveni won immense popularity. She studied psychology and gave it a strong presence in her stories. She wrote 21 novels and 41 short stories.

There are several interesting stories as to how Anasuya became Triveni. The most authentic of them all is perhaps her own narration in a letter to one of her literary admirers. 'When I read in several newspapers that the ashes of Mahatma Gandhi were mixed with the waters at Triveni Sangama, I experienced an inexplicable feeling in that name, Triveni. Just then I had begun to write, and in those days every writer had a pseudonym. I started writing under the name of Triveni.'

THE PROBLEMATIC CHILD
(Excerpt)

'Nagendra, come closer' I called. When he stood before me, I held his face in my palms and looked deeply into his eyes. I did not find the insane gleam of madness in his eyes. Instead, peeking through his eyes, I could realise the silent pain deep within his soul. There were waves of sadness rising behind that calm face, unbeknownst. The searing pain would rise from those eyes and silently ebb away. The boy could not share his suffering with others. The sadness squeezed his heart, hurting it unbearably. I looked away from him, unable to tolerate it.

An elderly person with graying hairs entered, visibly distraught with tiredness. He however seemed delighted to see Nagendra. 'Janaki! Nagendra has come!' he called out.

'He came sometime ago. I'll bring some coffee and snacks,' the reply came from the kitchen. He turned towards me and said, 'We are indebted to your timely help. I have been looking for this child since morning. My legs are nearly failing! Neither she nor I have had lunch today. He has already tried to run away twice before.'

'It's better if you keep a watchful eye on your grandson,' I replied.

'He is not my grandson sir. He's my son. We did not have any issues for a long time. My wife and I had been on several pilgrimages before eventually giving up on the desire for a child. My wife and I went to Subramanya and prayed to the snake gods. Finally, this Nagendra was born. He is now five years old. His younger brother Nagesha was born six-months ago.

I looked at Nagendra and teasingly said, 'Nagendra, get your brother to me! I want to see him too!'

Nagendra's face turned pale. His eyes were filled with hatred, rejection and violent anger. I was shaken up with his sudden change of expression. His father panicked and told

me, 'Sir! Please do not bring up the topic of his younger brother in front of him. We do not let him see Nagesha at all. He goes berserk when he looks at the child. He literally spews venom against him!'

Bending towards me, he whispered, 'It's all my bad karma. The boy is slightly insane!'

Translated by
Praveen Shivashankar

THE FULL POT
(Excerpt)

Rani looked at the green *jaaji* creeper climbing the window pane in the front of the house and said to herself 'Green Festoon'. Her heart was burning with a sense of dissatisfaction, disturbance and shortcoming. It was engulfed in this unfilled void. She had lost her ability to enjoy her life to the fullest. She had become a vessel that was full. Even if one attempted to fill it with water, wouldn't it just pour away?

Thinking that the lady of the house had come for supervising his work, the gardener Nanja started digging out the plants with new vigour. 'Madam, we should bring some Dahlia flower saplings,' Nanja said enthusiastically. Looking at him dismissively, Rani remarked, 'Let's see'. She did not even have a percent of the enthusiasm that Nanja had. She had lost her interest in everything. If her husband asked her to buy a new saree, she'd say, 'I'll buy it sometime.' There were similar responses given — be it about tasting a new food or seeing something new and interesting.

She did not find any happiness in getting something she desired, because she did not struggle to get what she wanted. What's the happiness in getting things without having to struggle for them? Is there any excitement in that? The moon is considered precious because he is up above in the sky. How meaningless it would be, if the moon could be hung in some corner of the room!

Nanja was staring at the designs on the border of the saree that his mistress was wearing. He admired her a lot. As she stepped forward, Nanja's rustic talk continued to follow her. Rani wondered to herself how he could be so happy. Roaming around, she came to the backyard of the house. A small house in the backyard was given to Nanja. He stayed there with his wife and eight children.

Nanja's eldest daughter Chennamma had her youngest sibling on her shoulders and was putting the baby to sleep. She was wearing one of the torn sarees of Rani. Nanja's elder son was helping his mom at the grinding stone. The remaining five were playing in front of the house.

Nanja's family had never seen enough food or clothing for themselves. But there was no dearth for their happiness, contentment and peace. On Ugadi, Rani had seen them rejoice wearing new clothes even though it was cheaply stitched. She had concluded that, she would remain devoid of experiencing happiness like theirs all her life.

Translated by
Praveen Shivashankar

THE QUESTION

Aryamba Pattabhi

Aryamba Pattabhi is a master's in Sociology from Mysore University and is the younger sister of the Kannada writer Triveni. She wrote about 40 novels and some of them are *Kappu Bilupu*, *Eradu Mukha*, *Savatiya Neralu*... *Marali Banda Mamate* and *Udaya Ravi* are her short story collections. She has written for children, penned biographies and travelogues. In fact, she has written a book on tennis which is a huge contribution to sports.

Drawing by: Madhura Channiga

The day's work at college was done, I downed some horrible tea at a restaurant on the way, and returned to my room where a letter from my mother awaited me.

'Why have you not come to the village recently? Are you angry with me? My health is not like it was before. Responsibility of Kamli is weighing large on my mind,' said the letter.

Kamli is my maternal uncle's daughter. My uncle had two daughters. One is married. That very year my uncle and aunt died in a road accident. The responsibility of young Kamli fell upon my mother. I was still studying at that time. My mother was waiting for me to complete my studies, land a job and marry Kamli and relieve her of this responsibility. I work in Bangalore but mother and Kamli stay at the village. Once in a while I visit them in deference to their feelings. After all the mundane, small talk, my mother always returns to the topic of me marrying Kamli — like the tongue that reverts to probe the cavity in the teeth in spite of the knowledge of the pain. I turned a deaf ear to her diatribes. Finally, I got tired of her talk and stopped visiting them in the village altogether. It has been a year now.

And why should I visit them? To hear her go on and on about marriage? I crumpled her letter and threw it aside. To calm my upset mind I decided to take a walk in the Lalbagh gardens. The walk did not assuage my dissatisfaction and despair, so I returned to my room.

'Telegram'

It was from my mother. I opened it.

'Unwell. Start immediately', it read.

I was scared. In a great hurry, I gathered a few clothes in a suitcase, got into a bus and reached the village at dusk. It was drizzling and I shivered in the cold. As soon as my feet met the ground the slush clung to me.

Mud... darkness... rain... wind...

Oh! What am I doing here? I will meet mother and return to Bangalore tomorrow.

The door was closed. I knocked. Kamli opened the door and scuttled away shyly which irritated me no end.

Why should she feel coy and run away from me without a word? Does she think of me as her future husband that she has to be coy?

I stood on the door step and yelled 'Mother'.

Mother was sitting on the mat with her back to the wall. Not in the least bit sick. The *pagade*[1] board and coins were spread out before her. She and Kamli were having a quiet game of *pagade*.

'Oh you are here. But why so late?'

'You are the one who sent me the telegram saying you were ill. Here I've come in such a hurry and...

'Yes. I am a bit unwell and felt I had to talk to you'

Illness was an excuse to make me come to the village and get me married to Kamli — Is that the plot hatched by my mother?

After having a wash I sat for my dinner which was served by Kamli. My favorite tomato *rasam* and ladies finger *gojju!*[2]

'Kamli has fried some of your favorite chips. Please have them' said mother.

Oh! mother has made Kamli prepare all my favorite dishes. My irritation turned to anger. Both of them are using it as a ploy so that I cannot escape...

'No!' I shouted. Kamli who was about to serve my food was taken aback. She had a glass of butter milk in her hands. She was the reason behind all this. I glared at her and she averted her eyes.

My bed was ready in the room. The soft bed beckoned to my travel weary body. Instantly I was aware that the bed was made by Kamli and again anger took hold of me and I felt as

---

[1] A desi version of chess

[2] Rasam is a watery preparation made with lentils and tomato, gojju is a tangy dish

if I were sleeping on a bed of thorns. I got up from the bed and stood by the window.

The full moon in the sky reminded me of Kalpana.

Kalpana! The beautiful, educated Kalpana. My colleague at the college where I work. Hails from a rich family. Yet no airs. A good debater. I was impressed by her intellectual prowess. She understands me very well. We have been working together for the past two years. I smoke and have a drink occasionally. Kalpana knows and does not mind. She loves me. If mother gets an inkling about my drinking and smoking she will surely die of heart break. Kamli who has spent most of her life in village will never be able to adjust to the life in a town. If she knows of this she will create a ruckus. Village bumpkin! Will I be happy if I have her hand in marriage?

'Kalpana...Will your parents agree to our match?' I had asked her once.

'I have their complete support in all my decisions. They will never come in the way of my happiness'. If Kalpana who is a woman can make her own independent decisions, why can't I, being a man? Why should I bow down to mother's wishes and marry Kamli?

Kamli and I grew up together. I cannot think of her as my wife.

I should explain all this to mother. But how? I don't think she will understand. Both are unaware of the life in town and I am stuck between the two. Will I be happy marrying a person I don't love? Can I live in peace? Oh! I should not have come... ...

Last week I had promised Kalpana. 'I cannot marry anyone but you. This time when I visit my mother, I will let her know about us.'

One should never go back on one's promise. I should not betray Kalpana who is waiting for me.

I tried to sleep but all these thoughts kept me awake. Finally, as I was drifting towards sleep... I had a dream... ...

A vast desert. I am running. Ahead of me are two ladies. They are running faster than me. One of them looks modern,

dressed in a blue transparent saree, while the other has donned a plain cotton saree. I could not see their faces. I kept running. I ran faster, hoping to reach at least one of them. I tripped and fell. I woke up. There was darkness all around. I opened my eyes to the darkness around me and realized that it was a dream. I fell asleep again.

I am married to Kalpana. Mother died of heart break. Kamli committed suicide. She is now a ghost who haunts me. 'No I will never leave you alone,' she falls on me. I scream.

When I woke up it was broad day light. Kamli ran into my room on hearing me scream and asked what the matter was. I replied 'just a nightmare'. Right then a thought occurred to me. Kamli is alone with me in my room. Mother is asleep. There is nobody else in the household. Why should I not tell her about Kalpana? I might get some respite from all this constant worrying.

I raised my head to speak to her but she was already gone.

'You are a coward,' my inner mind said. Why should I be afraid to speak of my decision to my mother? Isn't self-deception a great crime?

In the morning, I had a hearty breakfast with my mother keeping me company. *Menthya dosa* and coconut chutney. It was tasty. Kamli manages the household very well. After food it is my habit to have half a cup of hot coffee. Kamli came to me with coffee. While handing the coffee to me her hand met mine. Was it deliberate? I wanted to swing the cup to the wall and break it to pieces and run away to a far-off place ...Far from these two, never to return...

Kamli was standing in a corner, with her eyes to the ground. This filled me with disgust and anger.

Mother wants Kamli to be her daughter-in-law and Kamli sees me as her future husband.

Should I marry Kamli to make my mother happy? Should I live for my mother? Can I not live for myself?

Mother's stubbornness, Kamli's desire, helplessness... These thoughts wreak havoc on my mind. I should get away from here tomorrow. Mother will definitely broach the subject

of marriage tonight. That is the reason she asked me to be here. I should make everything clear tonight. It will be Kalpana whom I will be marrying. I know that as soon as I mention Kalpana, my mother will use her sure fire weapon-tears, against me. It is in my mother's nature. Nothing I say will matter to her. Should I succumb to her wishes and put an end to my love?

'Somebody must have died today. That is why the sky is weeping,' murmurs my mother, watching the heavy rains.

I wanted to scream, 'It is me who is dying because of you both!' But I kept my peace.

'Kamli, my feet are aching. Could you please massage it with a little oil?' Before the words were out of my mother's mouth, Kamli set aside the task in hand and hurried away to get the oil. She massaged my mother's feet with tenderness. I saw tears in my mother's eyes.

'*Maami*, why the tears? Is the massage hurting you?' asked Kamli.

'No, Kamli it is very soothing. You look after me so well. I would be long dead without your tender ministrations...'

'Kamli will be my daughter-in-law,' was declared by my mother when Kamli was born. I was five years old. If anybody asked me who my wife was, I would reply 'Kamli' and that would send everyone into peals of laughter. I was at an age when I was not aware of the meaning of wedding, family etc. I thought it was fun and I used to laugh. But now?

What if I marry Kalpana? My mother will not take a liking to her. Educated girl, hailing from a well-to-do family, she won't be able to adjust to the traditional outlook of my mother. The result will be discord between the two of them and I will have to bear the brunt. No one will be happy. 'You are the cause of all this!' I thought, looking at Kamli. Unaware of my thoughts, Kamli was still massaging my mother's foot with the meek look of a lamb. I felt sorry for her. Why should I be angry with her? She is not at fault. She has been directed to blindly marry someone that her elders have decided. Love, marriage, lust does not occur in her

thoughts like it does in city bred girls. I observed Kamli closely.

She is quite good looking. Simple way of dressing and moving about. Long plaited hair, serene countenance. If I marry Kamli I would not have to worry about mother. She will be well looked after by Kamli. Yet I could not cheat on Kalpana and marry Kamli. Just when I was quietly studying her she suddenly looked up and our eyes met. Her eyes were spitting fire.

'Will God forgive one who is unfair to me?' was the question her eyes carried. I felt myself soften. I thought her glance would weaken my resolve to marry Kalpana, so I retreated to my room.

My mind was in turmoil. If I marry Kamli two people will be happy. I will be at peace. If I marry Kalpana it will be the death of two people, a lifelong sadness for me.

Somewhere within me I felt my feelings for Kamli changing. My mother has never felt secure in her life. If I marry Kalpana it will be a death sentence for her. No No No...

Trying to grapple with the reality, swimming against the current, I reached the shores of that turbulent sea and finally came to a decision.

After dinner, mother asked me to come and sit beside her. I was bracing myself for her question — 'When will you marry Kamli?'

I kept my answer ready anticipating the question. But mother said, 'Kamli's wedding date has been fixed for the sixteenth of next month...'

I felt myself burn with anger. Without consulting me, they have fixed the date for the marriage. She did not think of asking my permission. This is characteristic of my mother. She will do what she thinks is right. No place here for my opinion.

I was silent. My mother continued...

'Girish is an engineer with a great job in Madras. He is the only heir to his wealthy father. He is very good looking'

Mother's words were unexpected. I felt a lump in my throat. Oh! Kamli will be marrying someone else.

'Who is Girish?'

'Kamli was visiting her sister a couple of months ago. She met Girish there. They like each other. Girish visited us here. A gentleman. Kamli is very lucky to have found him. I don't think I will live for long now. You are so faraway. If something untoward happens to me what will be Kamli's fate? So I decided not to delay her wedding and hence fixed the date. Please take leave for a week to attend the marriage...'

'Yes' I replied wearily and returned to my room.

Did Kamli not want to marry me at all? Or did she guess that I did not want to marry her and hence her decision to marry Girish? These questions remained with me.

We have known each other for 20 years, but she goes and gets engaged to Girish after an acquaintance of a few days? Kamli likes Girish over me.This thought gave me great pain.

I bid good bye to mother and left the house with my bag. I heard a laugh behind me. I heard it echoing around me. The laugh accompanied me even as I reached the end of the road. I did not turn back to find out. What if it was Kamli laughing at me? I quickened my pace.

Translated by
Malathi Shenoy

SUCH A STORY...

Usha Navaratnaram

Usha Navarathnaram was an extremely popular Kannada writer, who wrote popular ficition. She along, with Saisuthe, became a household name. She has written several novels, some of them are *Hombisilu, Ninnolume Nanagirali, Mooru Hejje* and more. Many of her novels have been made films.

I got off the bus and glanced around. I was not familiar with anyone in this place. The bus stand was quite crowded. I stepped forward even as I adjusted my backpack on my shoulder. The editor had categorically stated — 'Go there and collect all the news properly — ensure there is something worth the scoop. If we only publish stale and old news, who'll read our newspaper!! There should be something sensational!' But where will I find sensational news?!! Everything is stale here! The same old fights, communal riots, dowry harassment, sexual harassment, police atrocities, political fall outs, reconstitution of the cabinet, horse trading of ministers and scams in the purchase of foreign materials or weapons, so on and so forth!

'Sir, do you need a coolie?' I turned around. A young boy with a worn out white shirt and blue shorts was looking at me. In his eyes, there was no radiance of hope about his future. Bereft of any brilliance and full of helplessness, they seemed to be saying that he was no beggar but someone struggling to lead a life of dignity. 'No thanks!' I declined, 'I have only one suitcase and my backpack is over my shoulders'. Yet the tenderness on his face captivated me.

'Fine... here hold this suitcase... is there any good hotel or lodge here?'

'Oh yes sir! But food is pretty expensive, and unhygienic.'

'Of course! That's how typical hotels are. We can't expect them to be like our homes!'

'There's a Padma Lodge sir. It costs 45 rupees for a room. He provides hot water for bath. One plate meals will cost five rupees. It will be full of cheap vegetables like beetroot, radish, knolkhol and such vegetables only. Oh yeah! If you travel into the city, there is a Rockland Hotel there. But it's very

expensive and offers all types of facilities. One room costs 150 to 200 rupees... and then there is Brindavan Hotel...'

'So you market hotels too, eh? Do you get some commission from this too?'

'Oh no sir... I have just enquired about the hotels. It helps me to assist new visitors like you when they arrive to the city!'

'Interesting! You seem quite smart! How did you realize that I was new to this city?'

'I realized it as soon as you got off the bus and started glancing around.'

'What have you studied?'

'How can I study sir? I stopped my studies after 6th standard.'

'Why are you working as a coolie inspite of being educated?'

'Oh who would employee me?! I worked for a few days in a hotel. How could I take care of my younger brother, sister, and my mom with that meager salary?!'

'How much do you earn from this coolie job?'

'Well some people like you take pity and give me some amount of money and say a few kind words. I am not just a coolie sir; I also do a few odd jobs here and there.'

'That's a good boy. Now can you suggest some good hotel which would cost about 10–15 rupees per room?'

The boy looked at me — 'Everything is so expensive now. If you so desire, you can have your lunch at a hotel and sleep somewhere outside — there's some space in the frontyard of the school or there is a temple too.'

I felt that the boy was right. Meals would cost about five rupees and I will get bored staying alone. 'Come boy, let's go to a good hotel and have a sumptuous lunch.'

'No sir! You have your lunch and come. I'll take care of your luggage outside the hotel... you can pay me later.'

'Oh come here. It's so boring to eat alone... come... show me the hotel. Let's both have lunch and then you can show me a place to sleep.'

I forced him to join me for lunch at a hotel. As we sat down, everyone there started staring at the boy and me!

'Two plate meals!' as the boy ordered, the waiter smiled at him. 'Hey Krishna! How is that you are here! Is this person your relative?'

Krishna's face turned red with embarrassment but he did not speak. I learnt the boy's name and I also realized that he was a familiar face. We ate sumptuously and left the hotel.

'Now show me a place to sleep'

He walked silently. Later he stopped at the end of the street.

'Sir, if you sleep at the school you'll be bothered by the mosquitoes there and it is rat infested too. There are many robbers near the temple. There are many beggars also who flock to the frontyard of Madevappa's shop, then the space below the banyan tree is also not suitable as people say that the tree is haunted...'

'Oh god! Why didn't you say all this early on?' I protested.

'Don't worry sir. I know a person who lives close by. He is a very good person. You stay there for a night and leave.'

'Oh no! Why should I go to stay in some stranger's house? I'll stay in some place till tomorrow. There is a function that is happening here tomorrow afternoon. I'll head back once that is over.'

'A function sir...? I don't know of one happening!'

'What's that you say! Tomorrow the MLA Parashivappa is holding a public rally. Isn't it? He is going to apprise the people of the improvements that he has brought about!'

'Oh! ...leave that aside sir. No matter who comes to speak, the conditions of people like us wouldn't change... do you see that red tiled roof over there? The one which has a saree put in front? That's the very house I was telling you about'

'That is such a small house! Who knows how many people would be staying there — how can I go there and cause an inconvenience to those people!'

'Oh! It's not an inconvenience sir! A lot of people come there to rest for the night and leave in the morning. You can pay them whatever you feel like — it helps them and is useful

for you too! Come sir!' Krishna held my hand and led me to the house.

The brick laid in the steps on the front of the house was starkly visible. The cement had come off. An old saree was draped to the door of the house as a screen. As soon as we stepped in, an aroma of some incense stick immediately greeted us. An old mat, a small stool, an old rickety cot on which was spread a faded mattress — these were the only furnishings visible. I could hear some footsteps in the inner room.

'You stay here sir. I'll be right back.' Krishna went inside and returned soon. He had brought a bedspread for the mattress and spread it on the bed.

'Please sit here on the bed sir. You can sleep comfortably here. I'll wake you up in the morning! You can pay me lump sum for all the work. I'll give you company till you sleep.'

'Don't they charge any money to sleep here?' I enquired. Krishna laughed strangely — 'It's your wish sir — they don't ask anything in particular.'

In any case, I may have had to pay nearly 50–60 rupees for a hotel. I took out two 10 rupee notes and a five rupee note from my purse and handed them to Krishna.

'Please give this to them and convey my gratitude.' Krishna's face lit up. He ran inside. I could hear some whispers from inside and started wondering if what I paid was less. Even as I was thinking of paying some additional amount, Krishna returned. In his hand he held a shining bronze plate. There were a glass of milk, four plantains, arecanut, betel leaves and some slaked lime. I laughed looking at that.

'I don't want any of these Krishna. Just one banana is sufficient. You take the rest and return the glass of milk to them.'

Krishna appeared doubtful. 'Let it be here sir. You can tell them yourself later — I'll leave now.' He left the plate nearby. I gave him the remaining three bananas. As he left, he closed the door behind him. I took out a blanket from my handbag. I was doubtful about turning the lights off. I thought that the

owner of the house may come to turn off the lights and may talk to me too. At the same time, I didn't want their electricity bill to rise. I turned off the lights and lay down on the bed. I was quite tired with all the work since morning and having travelled in a noisy bus with little rest, I was overcome by fatigue and slept soon.

At some time in the night, I felt someone come and sleep next to me. It was pretty dark. I thought Krishna may have come. As I slowly put my hands around, I felt something warm and soft and immediately woke up startled.

'Who is this?'

I did not get a response. I got off the bed and turned on the lights. There was a good looking woman on my bed.

'Who are you? Why have you come here? What do you think of me?' The woman sat cowering with fear. 'You did not take the bananas and milk. Why? I had sent it through Krishna. Isn't it?'

I did not speak. I folded and blanket and kept it in my bag. The woman sat with her head down.

'I came here asking for some place to sleep. I was not seeking some company to sleep with.' I rushed towards the door. The door was locked from outside. I realized it as I started pulling on the door to open. The woman stood at a corner — now visibly shaking with fear. As I heard someone unbolt the door from outside, I flung it open. Krishna was standing there — a small girl and a small boy were standing on either side. It appeared as though he had woken up just then. 'Krishna! You are here too?!' I asked him looking at the bed and mat spread out in the front yard.

He put his head down.

'Krishna! Why did you bring me here? What did you think of me? How long have you been doing this work? I thought you were a decent boy!'

'I have been doing this since four years sir. If some good guys like you come and sleep, it'll give me a chance to earn some money. My sister, brother and mother can eat well.'

'Does your mother know the work that you are doing?'

He put his head down. 'She knows sir.'

'Stop being a pimp and learn to live honorably. Stay away from this vile woman. Take your brother and sister away from here and sleep elsewhere. Who is this woman? Why are you working for her?'

'Poor lady sir! Her husband left her at a young age. He was a drunkard and spent all the money they had. One day he took away all the valuables from the house and ran away and hasn't returned since then. The loans from the stores, the house rent were all pending. What could the poor lady do sir? She had three young children to take care of too. Having suffered the pangs of hunger and destitution, unable to bear the cries of the children, she repaid the loans in a way she could. The store owner came for a week every night to collect his dues and the house owner visited every night for a month as collection of house rent. Thus, whatever her needs were, they were met in this manner. Because she sold her body, her children could get food to eat and a roof over their heads. The son will fix everything when he grows up sir. Till then, this is the fate.' Krishna went inside and returned with the twenty five rupees I had given earlier. 'Please take this sir. She doesn't take money for free!'

I did not take the money.

'It's ok. Give it to her. Tell her to keep this as payment for staying honorable for at least a day and to feed her children with this money. Tell her I am giving this money for the sake of her children.'

I left without looking back. Krishna came running — 'Give me the luggage sir. I'll carry it for you.'

'No boy. I'll carry it myself. Tell me Krishna, why were you defending that woman so much? You are bringing men home for that lady. After all how is she related to you?'

Krishna looked at me. 'Everyone in this country is doing the same work sir. In the political melee aren't they using our country for so many purposes? They've kept the motherland for sale in the marketplace!'

'You don't understand such matters. You need to answer me Krishna! Who is she to you?'

Krishna put his head down and replied softly — 'My mother.'

Translated by
Praveen Shivashankar

SAANI

C.N. Mukta

C. N. Mukta was yet another popular writer of Kannada. She, Usha Navarathnaram, and others wrote mostly novels set in middle class milieu, and not specifically in the feminist mode. Her famous works are *Vimukthe, Manassu Mandara* and others.

Naga Patel was having breakfast with his father when the servant's voice was heard outside. When Naga went out he heard his father asking, from inside, 'Who is it Naga?'

'It's Mariya father.'

'Oh. What is the matter Mariya that brings you here early in the day?'

'Saani passed away my lord. Patel asked me to inform you and bring you along.'

The news made Gowda freeze while tearing the chapati into a smaller piece.

'What? Sani passed away?' came Gowda's voice without him realizing it. Gouravva, his wife, was by his side about to drop a dollop of butter on the chapati he was eating. She wore an unpleasant expression.

'Be seated. I will come right away,' said Gowda, which angered Gouramma.

'How closely related is she to you that you have to leave immediately without having breakfast?'

'Shut up. Don't scream,' ordered Gowda and walked with Mariya. Nagaraj followed his father with chapati in his hand.

'When did she pass away?'

'It seems she passed away while asleep. Chennawwa discovered about the death when she went this morning to deliver milk. When the door remained closed after continuous knocking she informed Patel who called others.'

When Gowda arrived at Sani's place there was a huge crowd there. In the outer hall the dead-body of Sani was placed. Her hair was all over the place. The bindi on her forehead had faded and wiped off slightly. The saree had creases on it.

'Would she have presented herself to the world in this fashion, had she been alive?' wondered Gowda.

Shopkeeper Narayana Shetty, Patel Rangappa, Postmaster Janaki Raamayya, Chairman Mahadevappa, School master Chennaswamy, Hussain Saheb who had a garment shop all were seated in the outer hall where the corpse was kept.

Gowda, on seeing all of them, felt he was late.

Making place for Gowda to sit, Saheb said, 'Sad that your Sani passed away Gowda.'

Gowda sat down grumbling over Saheb referring to Sani as, 'Your Sani.' But he did not let the voice of his mind escape his lips. To cover his thoughts and divert the flow of talk Gowda asked, 'When did it happen?' Saheb explained.

'I am getting late for school,' said Chennaswamy as he got up from his seated position.

A voice erupted in Gowda's mind saying, 'All these days he would lock the school and be at Sani's place. Though he forgets will people forget?'

'I have made my son sit at the post-office. I need to leave now as he can't handle the work there. Please let know if there is something that I need to do,' said Janaki Ramayya getting up from his chair.

Janaki Ramayya's weekly visit to Sani's house had not tarnished his name because everyone knew that he used to look after the accounts of Sani. There was no 'immoral' relationship between the two. So when he left nobody there felt or said anything.

'I need to open the shutters of the shop. It's inauspicious to shut the doors of the shop on Friday,' said Shetty which made Gowda want to slap Shetty.

'Bastard. Did he forget having gotten a necklace for Sani and feeling proud when she flaunted it? Now he acts as if he is in no way related to her,' the voice in Gowda's head exploded.

Mahadevappa asked, 'Who will do the funeral rites? Did Sani have any relatives?'

'Sani has relatives all over the village. But it's difficult to spot them,' said Gowda and smiled.

The smile went contagious in the hall.

Villagers kept coming in. Women of the village gave the body of Sani a bath, draped a new saree, decorated her hair with flower and forehead with turmeric and kumkum. They were all touching Sani's feet. Among them there was Mahadevappa's wife Parvati too. Her presence brought a smile on the face of Mahadevappa.

When Sani was new to Kallhalli, Mahadevappa was also quite young. Though he had just married Parvati she hadn't come to her husband's house yet. Sani had fallen for Mahadevappa and initiated the friendship between the two. Their relationship continued fearlessly. But Mahadevappa's father got anxious and got Parvati home without further delay. When Parvati arrived Mahadevappa anchored himself to the house. But that did not continue for long. When Parvati went to her parents' place for delivery Mahadevappa's feet effortlessly walked to the doors of Sani. On returning with a son Parvati did her best to snatch back her husband from the clutches of Sani, but without any success. The beauty and graceful talk of Sani gripped the attention of Mahadevappa without letting his gaze shift back to Parvati. Then one day, a helpless Parvati knocked the doors of Sani with a broom in her hand. When the door opened she trashed Sani heartlessly.

'Couldn't you find anyone else to trap? Wonder what you had done in your previous life to be born as a prostitute. At least now do some good other than running the lives of respectable people like us. Else even this life will not ensure a better life in your next life.'

Mahadevappa was peeping through the window as Parvati spitted these words in anger. Sani went in and dragged him out and showed him the door. Those doors never again opened for Mahadevappa.

Seeing Parvati at the pre-funeral rites Mahadevappa wondered if it's the same Parvati who had cursed Sani once upon a time.

Kari Gowda remembered his own wife on seeing Mahadevappa's wife there.Kari Gowda on getting to know the fallen relationship of Mahadevappa and Sani had extended

his hand towards Sani. Life had to continue even for Sani. When Kari Gowda's presence became regular at Sani's house nobody in the village even dared to think of Sani. But when his wife Gouramma got to know of it all hell broke loose. But her tantrums did not shake Kari Gowda who said, 'Your screaming and shouting will not scare me. What has happened to make an issue? Have I died? Or have I not done enough for you? I want Sani. If she goes away I would want someone else. To be loyal to you I am not Sri Ramachandra.'

Nobody from his close associates bothered to drive some sense into Kari Gowda's head. They were all quite familiar with his fancies.

Kari Gowda had great respect for Sani who had not opened the doors to anyone after the two had got intimate. Kari Gowda also did not cheat her. He had got her ornaments. But after 2-3 years Kari Gowda got bored of Sani and his quest for a new lady had taken him to Chandra of the neighbouring village which marked the end of his relationship with Sani.

It was impossible for Sani to bid farewell to her profession. It was also a matter of her bread. She let herself slip into the hands of Husain Saheb. This saddened Kari Gowda who went to Sani one night. Sani had sent a message through a servant saying if she entertained Kari Gowda it would upset Saheb which she didn't want to. The message and it being sent through a messenger angered Kari Gowda even the more.

'Have I lost my sanity to do the funeral rites of the lady who insulted me?' Kari Gowda asked himself sitting before Sani's deadbody when everyone around were discussing about who would do the funeral rites.

Hussain Saheb was remembering the sweet moments he had spent with Ganga Sani.

'Nobody in our community has the beauty that she has,' was the opinion he had heard about Sani which made him long for her.

'My wife's beauty is not even remotely close to that of your's,' complimented Saheb and asked Sani to marry him.

To the proposal of Saheb she had replied sharply: 'Now you want to marry me Saheb since you find me beautiful. But tomorrow if someone else's beauty appeals to you, you will go marry her. What am I supposed to do then?'

Was there no truth in her words? That is how the brain of Saheb used to function. Saheb had inherited property from his grandfather. He owned a shop and had earned great money. There was no dearth of women who would dance to his tunes. Fatima had begged him to marry her knowing he already had two wives. She had promised to be his silent slave. But Sani was not like Fatima. She had her own code of ethics.

Sani on hearing the news had asked Saheb if it was true that he had married Fatima. Saheb confirmed the news to her and asked her to join his wives becoming one among them. 'What happened to the Lambani girl Lakshmi you married last year?' asked Sani. 'She is nomadic by nature. She can't stay in one place. She ran away with my servant Javara,' explained Saheb. 'Women are like dry fallen leaves to you on the path that you walk. You expect them not to react even when you walk over them. Do you know what goes through the women who have invested their emotions and trust on you? Get out from here. I have no place for people like you,' Sani had roared while throwing Saheb out of her house.

'You are crossing your limits. You have become arrogant because of your beauty. Don't be so proud. Your pride will not make you a respectable lady any way.'

'There is no pride Saheb. And there is no way I consider myself respectable. How can Sani become a respectable lady? But men like you turn every respectable lady into a Sani. Get lost...'

Now with the corpse of Sani in front of his Saheb's heart murmured, 'Had she listened to be and married me she would have died respectably. I would have done the funeral rites too. But now it's not possible. How can that path be mine on which thousand feet have trodden?'

Rangappa was getting anxious as everyone was looking for someone to do the funeral rites. He knew about Sani very well and knew how everyone around had some relationship with Sani at some point of their lives. He was puzzled by the silence of everyone in spite of the common knowledge about everyone's relationship with Sani.

It wasn't a big deal for Patel to do the funeral rites of Sani. He was ready too. But wasn't sure if his mother would be fine with it.

There were rumours in the village about Rangappa's father and Sani having a relationship once upon a time. It was being said that Sani had come to Kallahalli for Rangappa's father. But to the best of Rangappa's knowledge his father had never stepped into the house of Sani. Yet he never denied or dismissed the words of the villagers as he had heard a lot of stories around Sani.

When he had joined college he felt that no girl in college was equivalent to Sani. He had wished someone in college or everyone in college had the beauty of Sani.

When Rangappa returned to his village completing his final year BA exams he had assigned himself a schedule. He would go to the village temple early morning to catch a glimpse of Sani in wet clothes. She would be coming to the temple after having taken bath in the village lake. The curves of her body made more visible by the water soaked clothes on her body made his entire body tremble in excitement. Though she had crossed the age of fourty her beauty had not diminished. She was the angel from heavens for the people of Kallahalli.

One night Rangappa gathered all the courage in him to knock at Sani's door. On seeing him Sani had welcomed him with an elegant smile.

'Come in Rangappa. Come in...'

When Rangappa stepped in his legs were shivering.

'When did you return to the village?'

'It's a week since I returned'

'Does the village suit you after being exposed to city life?'

'Isn't this the place where I was born and brought up?'

'That means you still carry love for this village. Your father is not to be seen off late. How is he?'

'He is fine. Mother isn't.'

The servant had brought bananas, sugar and milk by then. It was Sani who had asked her to get them.

'Have them Rangappa.'

'No, I don't want them Sani.'

'Will I take 'no' for an answer? You have come home after ages and how can I let you go like that? It was nice when you were young Rangappa. You would come running and sit on my lap and ask what is there to eat. If I said there is nothing stored in the house you would insist I prepare something. If I insisted that you call me 'mother' you would call me 'mother' sweetly. Now you have forgotten your mother.'

When she peeled the banana and put it in Rangappa's mouth it had an electrifying effect on him. She caressed his head. He got so nervous that he had emptied the plate.

'Are you done with your studies Rangappa?'

'Yes. I have to take up a job now.'

'Useless fellow. Why do you want to take up a job? Can't you just look after the property of your father. You can be with him also that way.'

'Let's see.'

'Should I come and tell your mother?'

'What is that you want to tell my mother?'

'That she needs to get you married.'

'There is no hurry for my wedding.'

'The mind is a strange thing Rangappa. What if you go in search of someone the way you came in search of Sani today? You should bring good name to your parents. What happened today is fine. But do not come this way again,' said Sani like slapping him on his face.

Rangappa was sweating while running out of Sani's place. Since then he was scared of Sani and he had married Girija the very following year.

When the shadow slipped under everyone's feet Rangappa asked, 'What is to be done? Silence will lead us nowhere.'

Nobody uttered a word.

'What do you say Chairman?'

'Why do you ask me Rangappa? Was she my wife? Who am I to do her funeral? I came because someone took the effort to inform me. Is that my fault?' asked the Chairman beating the towel he had worn on his shoulder in air. The gathering was stunned listening to his words.

Kari Gowda made an excuse of having to go to the city to meet MLA and left quickly. Hussain Saheb was becoming restless sitting there. When his son came and whispered something in his ears Saheb said, 'It seems there are guests at home. I need to go,' and left.

All left one by one and only Rangappa was left. He wanted to smash everyone's teeth at that point of time. Sani had lost her value when she was reduced to a dead-body.

'What should we do now Rangappa?' asked his friend Mahesha.

'Let's ask Janaki Ramayya. Let's do as he says.'

'We should do something by ourselves.'

'We can. But I am not sure if it would go well with my mother.'

'It wouldn't be fair if your mother spoke ill of Sani.'

'Why do you say so?'

'Come, let me tell you.'

'Who will be here if we leave?'

'There are so many here! They are sitting as if worshipping Sani, mindless people. Nobody served simple rice soup to her when she was sick in her last days. Now they are showing their affection towards her.'

Rangappa followed Mahesha. Both sat in Bhat's hotel sipping tea. Mahesha said, 'Your father lived with Sani before he got married. He wanted to marry her. But your grandparents fell at Sani's feet asking her to stay away from their son. Then Sani asked your grandparents to go ahead with the wedding of their son and vowed to stay away from their son. And she kept her promise. She did not open the door even if your father went to her.'

'Is it so?'

'Yes, Ranga. It wasn't difficult for Sani to ruin your family. But her good heartedness saved your family and its dignity.'

Rangappa remembered his experience and told himself, 'Sani was a lady of integrity.'

When they returned after having tea the gathering was still silent and wondering what to do with Sani's dead body. When Rangappa was looking at Sani's dead-body lying like an orphan he heard his name being called. When he turned back to see it was his mother Giriyamma.

'You get ready to do the funeral rites of Sanu,' said Giriyamma wiping tears off her eyes.

The gathering stood with jaws dropped. Rangappa did not try to wipe off the tears rolling down his cheeks.

Translated by
B.A. Samvartha

WITHERING FRINGES

Geeta Nagabhushana

Geetha Nagabhushana, who hails from Savalgi village on the outskirts of Gulbarga city, has retired as principal of Nagareshwar Composite High School here. She has penned over 50 books and 15 dramas. One of her works, *Hasimamsa Mathu Haddugalu*, was made into a film *Hennina Koogu* by Dorai Bhagwan.

The sun was about to set. The daylight had lost its vigour and tone, and appeared jaundiced. The amavasya[1] twilight descended lump by lump into Chenbasappa Gowda's courtyard, darkening everything around.

'Yavva[2]... I'll go to the grove and light the lamps at the elders' samadhi[3] and come back...,' Ganga yelled from the kitchen to her mother in the backyard. Bassaningavva, who was separating the thorns from the brinjal for the evening's dinner, raised her head.

She looked at her young daughter standing by the colourful kitchen door and staring at her and the mother's eyes dilated.

Draped in a bottle green Ilkal sari with blood red jari and kedage[4] coloured border, Ganga looked the epitome of youth. She resembled a doll, well-kneaded and shaped from golden-coloured wheat flour. With eyes the shape of a mango slice, nose the petal of kedage, chinlike aMuttula flower, ripe red chilli lips, chiseled body with perfect ebb and tide andglowing thick tresses, Ganga was undeniably a beautiful fair-complexioned girl.

'Why are you staring like that Yavva? Didn't you hear me say I'm going to the grove?'

Ganga chuckled. Gowdti woke up from her stupor.

'Haa... haan... go and come thayi[5]. But don't go alone. Take aayi[6] with you, okay? Go and come back in a jiffy. Don't stay out too late in the amavasya darkness.'

---

[1] New moon night
[2] Mother
[3] Tomb or burial place
[4] Pandanus flower
[5] Meaning mother, but also a form of referring any young woman.

'As you say, we'll be back quickly...'

When aayi and grand-daughter arrived at theirgrove located at the village entrance, the place was deserted except for a servant boy. Ganga's aayi was well beyond sixty. The old woman sat on the culvert of the well and told her grand-daughter,

'You go ahead light the lamp and be back child. I'll rest here for a while and catch my breath.'

'Alright then aayi ... you sit here.'

So saying, Ganga advanced to the middle of the grove. To the west were four samadhis in a line. Gowda's grandfather, grandmother, aayi's husband and others rested there, smoothly plastered in white chalk. Ganga placed oil lamps at each tomb and poured oil into them. She struck a match and held it to the wick's face. A wind raging from somewhere blew away the light.

'Death be to this... where did that ghost of a wind come from?'

Cursing, she struck another match. The lights came on. She brushed her seragu[7] to the Samadhis in respect and prostrated before them touching her forehead to the ground. She stood up. Effortlessly her gaze moved in the opposite direction, on to the black stone tomb that stood alone. She lifted a lamp in her hands and as if in a trance, traced her steps in that direction.

To the east end of the Gowda's grove, at the very edge, stoodthe lone tomb marked by a black stone slab. It lacked the smooth white look of the other samadhis. Unlike the others, it had not be cleaned and plastered with white chalk to lend it the look of a 'samadhi'. Only a long sheet of black stone adorned the tomb. As soon as Ganga approached the tomb, she sank as though drained of all energy from her nerves. Keeping the lamp and matchstick on the ground, she held the tombstone in a tight embrace, placed her face on its

6 Another word for mother in north Karnataka, here referring to grandmother

7 Loose end of a sari draped across the shoulder

heart and sighed deeply. With her breath rolled out tears from her eyes and fell on the stone tup-tup-tup.

'Shivu... my Shivu... How did this all happen Shiva... You here, silent like this, how long will you sleep as a corpse Shiva... how long will I... will I agonize like this?' she sobbed. She wept till her heart tore apart. In time, her tears subsided. The birds had started retreating to the shelter of the huge tree behind the tombstone. The air which had come alive with bird chatter grew silent. Confirmed about the sun's demise, darkness slowly started descending in lumps.

Ganga closed her eyes. For a second. The next moment she started swirling in a pool of rushing memories... only memories. All around her, above and below, all over, only memories engulfed her...

Ganga was Kaadahalli Chenbasappa Gowda's only daughter. He had two sons, but daughter, only one. Moreover, she was very beautiful. Ganga grew up as a loving daughter of the Gowda and Gowdti. She attained puberty when she was only twelve and by the time she reached sixteen, she had a well-chiseled body with firm ups and downs, oozing an intoxicating charm. Afraid that bad eyes may fall on her, Gowda made sure she remained indoors most of the time. Draped in colourful Ilkal silk sarees, as she took peacock steps to the kitchen, main hall, puja room, living room, the entire household would burst with happiness and pride listening to her chirpy laughter, the tinkling of her silver anklets and the jingle of her golden bangles.

Ganga's life blossomed beautifully under the shelter of the love showered by her parents, the affection of her brothers and enticements of her sisters-in-law. Emotions true to her age swelled in her body.

That day, it was Nagarapanchami[8]. Both her sisters-in-law had gone to their mothers' houses. Gowdti had placed a pan for making holige[9]. Aayi was unwell. The old woman had rolled up under a rug.

8 A festival in honour of Cobra the snake god.

9 A sweet dish rolled out like a pancake and cooked on the pan.

'Ganga, go quickly to the grove and offer milk to Nagappa[10], naivedya[11] to the elders and be back my child.'

Gowdti called out to her daughter. Draped in a new sari and blouse, and gold ornaments all over the body, Ganga started for the grove carrying the vessel of milk and naivedya plate.

At the grove, Seeninga, Gowda's trusted servant boy who was grazing cattle, smiled at her.

'Have you come to do puja, Gowdti?' he asked.

'Ho yes Shivu... come with me. You hold the naivedya plate at the elders' Samadhi. I'll pray to the anthill and offer milk to Nagappa...'

'How can I hold the naivedya for the elders' Samadhi, Gowdti? After all, I'm a Holeya[12] servant boy. ...It will be polluted...'

'Polluted... what polluted, mad cap... Moreover, who will see you here Shivu? You simply come... I'll be late. Look now, the sun is already overhead. I'm very hungry Shivu. I want to go back and eat. Come on...'

Shivu followed hesitantly. He took the naivedya plate from her hand and walked towards the samadhis. She went towards the anthill.

The over five-foot-high anthill in the middle of the grove was older than Ganga. It had grown wide with peaks, resembling a small mountain and stood with its back to the mango tree. All believed that Gowda's family goddess resided in the anthill as a snake. Though the Gowda's workers saw it from time to time, nobody harmed it, instead retreated from it with folded hands in reverence. On Nagarapanchami, it had become a practice for many years for the women of Gowda's

10 A reverential term for Naga or Cobra. As part of the custom observed during the festival, a stone or wood statue of the snake is bathed in milk. Mainly observed by women, sometimes, milk is directly poured into anthills where snakes reside, the myth being snakes consume the milk.

11 Holy offering.

12 An 'Untouchable' caste.

household to pour milk directly into the anthill instead of on a snake idol.

Ganga stood before the anthill. She offered flowers and fruit and held the naivedya. She scooped some milk in a dried coconut hollow and poured it into the anthill. The milk was insufficient for the vast anthill. She set aside the coconut and started pouring the milk straight from the vessel.

She was about to pull away her hand when a cobra, hissing in rage, emerged from the hole and raising its hood, smacked on her right hand. 'Yavvoo, I'm dead...' Ganga let out a blood-curdling scream and fell unconscious.

Seeninga, who was holding the naivedya plate at the Samadhi, heard her gruesome shriek and shuddered. Next moment he sprang towards the anthill.

At the tip of the anthill was the hooded cobra still hissing, close below was Ganga in an unconscious state, her hair was still loose after a wash, her seragu had slipped away and the naivedya was splashed all over... Seeing the blood on her hand, he lowered. Nagappa's teeth marks pierced his eyes.

'Gowdti... Gowdti... Gowdti...' he shook her. Uhhum... she did not regain consciousness. If he turned his head, there was the snake still hissing. He immediately lifted her and walked towards the Badami tree by the culvert of the well. There was no sign of a single soul around the grove. Being a festival day, all the workers had gone home. Only Seeninga, alone male with no home or haven, was in the grove.

He lowered her on the tree bed and without thinking any further, he held her hand to his mouth and started sucking the poison out, spitting it and repeating again and again. After half an hour of relentless pursuit, Ganga slowly opened her eyes. Gasping in weary, a tired Seeninga leaned against the tree.

As his sister had not come back for over an hour, Basrajappa went to the grove in search of her and was shocked to see the scene.

Having saved her life, Seeninga won Ganga's heart. The 18-year-old boy looked like a chiseled black statue. With parents dead and no relatives to call his own, he had ended

up in Gowda's house as a servant. His polite, loyal and honest demeanor had won him the trust of the Gowda's family.

The next day, Chennabasappa Gowda razed the anthill and had the snake killed. From that day, Nagarapanchami festival which had nearly cost the daughter's life, was never celebrated in that house.

'Shivu... I can't live without you. The day you saved me, from that moment this body and mind became yours Shivu... now only you have the right over this life...'

One evening when the evening sun had sprinkled colour on the grove's greenery, sitting in a secluded place, Ganga confessed to Seeninga. Seeninga who was watching the birds return to their nests in hordes, turned his neck, his eyes brimming with tears.

'Gowdti... do you think I don't know... with you talking like this for the last eight days, touching my hands my body, it is tearing my heart in fear. After all, you are Gowda's daughter. I'm a low born, a mere servant standing at your doorstep. My place is by your slippers. .. In this state, your love for me is awkward... Tomorrow if they find out, your brothers will axe us to death.'

'So are you backing away in fear Shivu... so your fear for your life is greater than our love. I'm ready to die. Once, only once, hold me to your heart. I'll breathe my last there. You are dearer to me than my life Shivu...'

Ganga broke into tears. Darkness was engulfing the evening light. The dusk that had crept over the greenery soon created an orbit of darkness around them.

Ganga wiped her tears with her seragu and heaved a sigh. Seeninga couldn't bear it anymore. He quickly drew her to his heart and kissed her fervently on the forehead, cheeks, eyes, chin and locked his lips with hers. Sinking into his heart, Ganga cried, laughed, and offering herself to the 'servant boy Seeninga' amidst emotions wrought with laughter and tears, she moaned in bliss.

As days passed, their love blossomed and matured. They met relentlessly in the grove, fields, river, mountain,

tamarind grove and mango orchard. Birds and bees, trees and plants, mud and grass, stars and moon, rivers and streams — they became witnesses to their love. Casting away all practices and tradition, norms and regulations, caste and creed, Ganga and Seeninga marched ahead. Who can wield force over matters of heart and love? Lovers, after all, are blind to the world.

But the world always has a roving eye on lovers. Ganga and Seeninga's love did not remain a secret for long with the sisters-in-law. There were many whispers among them. The whispers reached the brothers. The elder brother informed the father. Whispering, he said 'Yappa... This is very delicate. The silk seragu of our family has got caught in a thorn fence. We must untangle it very carefully...'

'Do whatever son... our honour should be intact...'

'You all keep mum... neither Ganga nor Seeninga must realize that we know about them. I'll take care of everything.'

In a month's time, Ganga's marriage was fixed to Eeranna, son of the Gowda from the neighbouring village. Ganga protested. She was vehemently against it. Finally, she even confessed that she loved Seeninga. Basraju, her brother, laughed wickedly. 'Look Ganga... we know everything... You simply agree to this marriage. Or else, we'll spare you but we'll chop that son-of-a-whore Seeninga into pieces and throw him in the river in front of the village. He'll come to ask for your hand, is it? Let him... let him...'

Ganga shuddered in fear. A chill shot through her from head to toe, freezing her and she felt as if she was dying. Khat, khat, khadhal... she felt as if a thousand thunders had struck her head at once, as if the ground had quaked open and swallowed her up 'ghulum'.

'Hmm... tell us, Ganga. What is it that you desire?' stormed Basraju, shaking Ganga from her stupor. Seeing her brother in front of her looking lethal and father seething in rage, she was sure that they could do anything. Biting her lips and drying out her tears, she agreed to the marriage.

Night after night, Ganga's eyelids refused to shut. Along with stars and the moon in the sky, she sat around the

darkness as if in guard. With her eyes wide open and lips pursed tightly, she challenged the jet-blackgloom that rushed around fiendishly and played hide and seek. She braved the thoughts that rose from her heart and pounded and pierced her.

Surely... she had done the right thing. She had rightly agreed to this marriage. Otherwise her brother would have murdered Shivu. In the past, her family had killed many a poor people. Cruel, they were. But what was Shivu's mistake after all? Was saving me on that Naragarapanchami day his mistake? Was it a mistake to submit myself to the one who had risked his own life to save mine? Actually Shivu had no hand in this. It was I who went after him for eight and more days, begging to be loved. Wasn't it only after I had wept and insisted that he had drawn me in his embrace? Wasn't it only after I threatened, 'I'll not live, I'll die' that he reciprocated my feeling? I was the one who insisted... I was the one who scolded him and... Poor thing, he is like an innocent child. So straight forward, my Shivu... Why should he give his life for a sin I have committed? Why should these merciless people take his life? It is okay if I agree to this marriage and rot in hell. My Shivu will at least be half as peaceful. That is enough for me. Agreeing to this marriage was the right thing to do. A good thing. With sundry thoughts like this, Ganga soaked her bed in tears and stuffed it with sighs. The bleak darkness started melting under her tears and the heat of her sighs.

Within a month's time, Ganga left her village in tears as Eeranna Gowda's wife and became a part of her husband's household. To avoid any untoward incident, Basrajappa kept surveillance on his sister. No one suspected anything.

But a week ago, a heart-wrenching, gruesome news fell on Ganga's ears.

'Gangi... some servant boy called Seeninga from your village... it seems he died after drinking arrack...'

When her husband came and gave her the news, Ganga froze in her seat. Seeninga who never drank arrack had died drinking! Brother Basrajappa's blood-thirsty eyes, his vicious

face, victorious devilish laughter rolled out in front of her eyes and a fire sprang in her heart stripping the truth threadbare.

As if she had lost all senses, that very day Ganga left for her mother's village with her husband. She went with aayi to the grove. She buried her face in aayi's lap and wriggled in agony. Crying and sobbing, she looked like a little fish out of water. Soaking aayi's lap with her tears, she asked her about Seeninga. The old woman who knew all about her granddaughter's past, let her into a secret. 'You shouldn't cry like this my child. After marriage, you left. Seeninga too was getting ready to leave the village. He had given up food and water, and whether sitting or standing, the air was too hot for him to breath; he had become mute. He spoke to no one. It seems one day Basrajappa mixed poison in arrack and forced him to drink it. Seeninga died, my daughter...They buried him in the grove so that no one will suspect anything amiss. They put a black slab on it, that's it. Look there, that is your Seeninga's tomb.'

The old woman pointed towards the black stone... Ganga approached it. The tomb was still fresh. Ganga placed her head on wept copiously. But Seeninga did not cry out to her from his tomb. He did not rise from it.

'It was not Seeninga's mistake aayi... I'm the one at fault. My brother should have killed me. But he saved his sister and claimed the life of the servant boy who was innocent. It is always like this aayi... Even if the upper castes are at fault, those who pay for it are the low caste Shudras. Whosever the fault may be, it is these innocent and simple low caste people who lose their lives...'

Ganga embraced aayi and sobbed as she spoke.

'Let it be child... this is the practice since generations now... The low castes pay with their heads for the faults of the big... the landlords make mistakes and the poor become scapegoats... hmm... let's go, it's gone dark...'

'Little Gowdti... it has gone very dark... aayi is calling, come yavva. Let's go home...' when the 10-year-old servant boy Baccha came running and called out, Ganga's memories

hurriedly got in and shut the door. She touched her forehead to Seeninga's tomb, pressed her lips and kissed it in lingeringly. It was not her brother Basrajappa who killed Seeninga, it was I.

As the thought dawned on Ganga, the amavasya gloom started filling up her eyes.

Translated by
Maithreyi M.R.

SHANTAVVA, THE MOTHER RUDRESHI, THE SON

M.S. Veda

M.S. Veda, born in Mysore district, is a lecturer in Maharani's Arts and Commerce college, Mysore. She has written poetry, short stories, novels and non-fiction writings. Her poetry collections are Gangotriyalli, Beelalugalu, Dakhalaguvudu Beda, and Kavyakoosu. Veda's short story anthologies and novels are Preeti mattu Saavu, Bili Hennu mattu Dundavvana Devva, Jameenu, Jaya and others.

SHANTAVVA, THE MOTHER
RUDRESHI, THE SON

But, avanni was just fine when I left home the last time,' said Rudreshi, with his eyes fixed on his brother, though he was aware that the gaze, attention, curiosity and interest of the coquettish, fish-eyed dames was on him. In his anxiety, he didn't even remember that he was to speak in 'pure grammar' in their presence. No sooner did the charming Rekha break into peels of laughter and just as all the other girls followed suit, Rudreshi's brother Parameshi got a feeling that he had been transported into a world of some magical creatures, which was not his own and that his brother, who lived amidst these, was surely the Marthanda Maharaja that Harikathe dasas described and forgot all about the purpose of his visit. He was saying to himself, looking at his clothes, 'Whatever it is, I should have come in better clothes,' when Rudreshi tugged at his brother's sleeve. 'Anno, what do these know about the joys and sorrows of our village. Their fathers earn. Mothers cook. They eat and without a reason laugh at peoples' faces. They are a jobless lot, come, let's go.' With the sole intention of calming himself, he let his anxieties and concern for his mother get converted into anger over the girls. He walked towards his hostel.

College, college girls, their laughter – as they came away from it all, Parameshi fell back to his world with a thud. His avanni (mother) was fine till recently. Since a month, she had begun to nod her head for everything. 'Did you eat Basava?' 'Yes.' 'Did you have a bite Basava?' 'Yes.' Now she had begun to say, wailing on her bed. 'I want nothing, it's enough if Siva gives me death.' As Parameshi was trying to recollect all this once again, Rudreshi's voice woke him up. 'Why anna you are talking as if there is a stick in your mouth. Is it time for avanni to go?'

'It looks like that Rudreshi. Yesterday Doddappaiah said: 'Santavva will not live long, she has turned her face to the east. Bring her out and put her in the frontyard,' repeated Parameshi, sadly.

As soon as Doddappaiah's name was mentioned, Rudreshi angrily blurted out, 'Yes, yes if you ask your enemy what your stars foretell, they will tell that you will die that very afternoon. Should one listen to Doddappaiah? I hope you have not put avanni in the frontyard?' He asked Parameshi with his eyes red. Parameshi badly wanted to piss at that moment.

But being fully aware of his younger brother's temper, Parameshi knew that he would assume the fierce Veerabhadra's avatara(incarnation) if he didn't get a reply immediately. The thought gave him shivers and with jet-speed he said, 'Ayyy, how is that possible?' The redness in Rudreshi's eyes then faded into love, concern for his avanni, while Parameshi's nerves eased back to normalcy. 'Don't I know that Doddappa is a two-headed viper, that he's a snake, don't I know? For all that, did 'we' build the house and bring avanni, or was it that 'dead husband' of hers who built the house for his wife and children so that they could live happily' 'Avanni has built this house all by herself, with the combined strength of a man and woman. Why should I pull her into the streets in her last days. Doddappa?' I asked.' Parameshi spoke the truth even if it amounted to self-praise.

Rudreshi felt immensely pleased realizing his brother's feelings for avanni. He put his hands around Parameshi's shoulder and said affectionately, 'That's like a family man. I'm glad you made him perspire. When porridge was as precious as rice and rice as precious as gold, we satisfied ourselves with salt and water. Where then was he to enquire about avva or her brood? Who asked this big man to give us his verdict at this crucial moment?'

'Ayy, those who call themselves elders of the village have told him that already. Patel Manjaiah of Dyavappanahalli praised me. He said 'Good, Parameshi, your mother struggled to bring you up... and today you have made all her sacrifices

fruitful. Your Doddappa has lived as long as four donkeys live and still has no sense in him,' Parameshi quoted with pride, by which time they had reached the hostel. Rudreshi entered his room. While he was stuffing a few clothes into his bag, his roommate asked, 'What guru, looks like you're leaving for somewhere.' Though his emotions swelled up at the question, he said, containing himself, 'It seems my mother is very ill, my brother has come to take me home.' With no patience to explain further, he headed towards the bus stand.

Two

In the village, when men and women wanted to abuse each other, a reference to the venerable had become a practice. The reason could be found in their argument itself. When a husband wanted to shout at his wife: 'What has come over you, ammi? Do you fear I shall leave you and the children in mid-waters like Santavva's husband did? I have made enough property to last for the next three generations. Even my grandson will not point his finger at me, okay. In case I had done something like Santavva's husband would you have spared me... tarrr... you would have torn my bum apart! One must worship that lady Santavva with folded hands. For someone who didn't have salt for porridge she now eats rice with ghee and salt... She owns a tenement in the village. She brought up two sons who are brave as elephants. She has given away her daughters to thriving households. To have a life like that you must have the fortune of seven births.' If this was his argument she would say, 'What kind of men are you? You sit inside the hatti with hands on your head and lament that there are no people to reap the harvest. Just look at Santavva, she manages to gather a hundred people from where she sits. You don't have the drive that the lady has? You criticize me, is it? Why do you still twirl your moustache? Off with it. You must be blessed to lead a life like hers, understand?' They would say. All these arguments had for their background the way in which Santavva had prospered.

Santavva, who was working as a labourer was married off by her father to Manaiah, a practically useless fellow. In those days, Santavva had never imagined how her life should be, what course it would take... nothing. In five years, he gave her four children and remained deaf to her joys and sorrows. With her three little ones and the fourth on her waist, she would labour without a break, while Manaiah sat in silence in the frontyard, coughing and spitting. She had never once said anything to him directly. Only on occasions when she could not contain her heartburns she would take it out on her father. 'Even before I opened my eyes you gave me away to somebody. You didn't even enquire. With this man and four children I must toil for a meal. Who told you I would shed tears if you hadn't got me married? If I was in your house wouldn't you have fed me?' She would start angrily and end tearfully.

In those days, when Santavva went asking for salt, Maniah's prosperous relatives had laughed at her. She had resigned to the fact that her husband was an ailing man and that she had to make the best of a bad bargain but had also resolved to lead a good life without giving an opportunity for the relatives to laugh at her. But how does one give shape to all these resolutions? With what she earned, she had to manage her husband's medicines, food for the family and a house that had not seen whitewash in ages and was on the verge of crumbling down. In such a predicament, how was it even possible to think of a piece of land, ox, and bullocks? With all other miseries, she would stomach even this heartburn quietly. 'When Santavva's baby in hand was hardly six months, Manaiah died. There was a sudden outburst of 'Ho...!' from Santavva's hatti, which died down almost immediately. There was no change in Santavva's life. Although she said that 'I too have a husband, he is inside coughing.' It was after Manaiah's death that she realized that even though he was good for nothing, he meant security for her. Well, Santavva knew that to get him back she was not Sati Savantri. Santavva hitched up her saree and assumed the role of a man. If she tied up six-month-old Rudreshi to

her waist and got down to work, three-year-old Parameshi would collect sticks and look after little sisters.

Santavva was a woman of small means. Considering that she was alone, there was nothing unusual about Santavva attracting the attention of lusty village men. With the pretext of helping, Santavva's brother-in-law had himself made advances. Santavva had immediately snapped at him, 'Only because you are my husband's elder brother, I'm forgiving you. Otherwise, I would have got the panchayat to settle this. Your eldest daughter is of my age... Atleast that shouldhave troubled you, Oh Sivane! What has become of the times...' She continued to lament for the fallen world and pleaded to Siva for justice, though the brother-in-law had left after she spat on his face. After Santavva thus insulted him, the brother-in-law stopped even the meagre supplies of milk and rice that he sent for the children. She had spent many a night by feeding the children with some puffed rice and water. Without proper nourishment, her body refused to produce milk and Rudreshi would get cranky and bawl the whole night. She sat up with him, crying many nights!

They lived an impoverished life until Rudreshi turned five. Then came a bright spark into her life — bank manager Rangaswamy. Even to this day, whenever she thought of him, she used to say with folded hands, 'Srirangapatnada Rangaswamy, he is like my father.' For Santavva, whohad not even seen a five-rupee note till then, almost fainted when he got her a loan of five thousand rupees from the rural bank. Brother-in-law then went round the village pouring outhis tale of woe: 'She has brought disgrace to the family and is even tarnishing Manaiah's name. She loafs around with that Rangaswamy... she grins... Even he wants her friendship. Santavva is still young you see...Why is this happening while I'm still alive, Siva Siva. What wrongs had I committed to see all this?'

Santavva turned a deaf ear to all this. She had grown quite confident by then. Parameshi was a grown up lad. He labored with her. The girls would take care of fetching water, cooking and all the other household activities. Rudreshi who

was about 5–6 years old, always stuck to his mother. She felt ten times stronger whenever he was around. She was very fond of this kid who grew up to be more masculine and smarter than Parameshi. Short-tempered, with a questioning spirit, he would often get into quarrels. Santavva felt that her kids would never let her down or besmirch the name of her house. She always felt that when Rudreshi was grown up all her problems would come to an end. Rudreshi did not disappoint her.

The first thing Santavva did with the loan money was to get back her piece of land, which she had leased out to Honnoorappa of Putta Dyavappanahatti. Honnoorappa tried to create trouble but was no match for Rangaswamappa's wisdom. Under Rangaswamppa's supervision, Santavva started rearing silk worms and in the next five years, she had acquired five acres of land, cows, bulls and sheep, and also a house. Women in the village started respecting Santavva and often engaged in a conversation with her: 'Did you have lunch Santavva? What did you cook?' So on and so forth. The entire village talked about how Santavva's ill-luck came to an end with her husband Manaiah's death. By the time she had crossed forty she had got Parameshi and her two daughters married and vowed with great enthusiasm that she would get someone as beautiful as film actress Sridevi for her favourite son Rudreshi. When Rudreshi heard that Santavva was on her deathbed, he just could not believe it.

Rudreshi, who was thinking about all this with utter disbelief, nudged his brother who had dozed off. 'But, avanni was so fine. What happened to her in just a month? Didn't you get her medicines?' He asked angrily. 'How is that possible, maaraya? Don't I know what a struggle it has been for her to make us what we are today? I would be doomed to hell if I didn't get her medicines,' Parmeshi explained and said, 'I believe avanni had a fight with Honnoorappa the day before amavasye. But avanni didn't tell me anything about it. I got to know about it from Kenchakka, who lives next door. 'What happened? How did it happen?' I asked her several times but she doesn't open her mouth. She looks at gods

photos and bawls. I thought someone must have cast an evil eye or it could be some bad air that has affected her and so I got her a talisman. Even that did not help. After that, I took her to the doctor. He examined her and said that it was not a physical ailment but a problem with mind. 'I will give a letter addressed to a doctor in Bangalore, take her there,' he said. I cannot manage all that. So I thought I'll tell you who can read and write and also, I thought, two would be company. So I came looking for you,' he said taking a deep breath. 'Are you your mother's son or what? Why didn't you send word for me when the quarrel with Honnoraiah took place? You behave like a big man. Looks like you have intentions of sending avanni up and living happily?' He said with anger, despair and anguish. 'Why did that idiot fight with avanni? Is he our relative or what?' 'No Rudreshi,' said Parameshi, trying to console his brother, 'I wanted to send word for you when the fight took place but avanni stopped me from doing so, 'No Parameshi. Don't send for him. He will go and fight with that man. Do you think a boy who is studying should come and waste his time over all this?' she said.'

'In the first place why did she get into a fight with him? Rudreshi insisted to know, 'What else could it be? He has a problem when others are doing well.... We took back our land from him and are leading a good life. He is supposed to have built a canal across our field to water his fields. He is a big man. Who is capable of talking to him? Even avanni has fallenill. I kept quite thinking that we would discuss all this once you come,' Parameshi blabbered. What kind of a man are you, I say? He digs up a canal you cannot even go and see it, is it? Fantastic! Don't tell me that this is how you will react if tomorrow someone takes away your wife.' At this point he realized that there were people around him watching, he kept quite biting his teeth.

Rudreshi on one or two occasions had observed how Honnooraiah and his people had kept a watch on him. He had ignored it thinking that indifference was the best medicine for arrogance. But what had the man said to his mother? What had he done to avva, who was still young? Has

avva taken it to heart and is she brooding over it? He questioned himself until he reached home. There were several faces looking at him from the windows. Many of them sat to decide what the next chapter was going to be when they saw the Eerabhadra – like Rudreshi who was stomping home with red eyes, flared nostrils and sealed lips. Honnoorappa's wife shut the door with a band the minute she saw him. Parameshi who held his breath and wondered what would happen next saw Rudreshi spitting at Honnoorappa's doorstep and walking away in great speed.

Three

His sister-in-law had kept some water ready. Rudreshi took it from her and washed his feet. He was startled by the noise that his sisters were making in the verandah. 'Did Rudresa come attigemma? Come Rudri, look at the state of your mother. She hasn't yet seen her grandchildren and she is getting ready to leave. Atleast you should save her.'

He stepped into the verandah and surveyed the atmosphere with great anxiety. His two sisters were sitting by avanni's head. His gaze turned to his avva. The intense pain and grief in her eyes struck him. Otherwise, he saw that she looked just as before. 'Will you just shut up!' he told his sisters, taking the situation into control. The entire hatti became silent. 'I'm sure all this drama put up by you people has prompted Doddappaiah to say that avva must be kept in the frontyard. Go get back to your work. Without a word, his sisters disappeared into the darkness of the neighbouring room, exchanging glances with their sister-in-law. 'Keep talking to avanni. I had asked Brahmayya to perform a puja. I'll go and get the prasada,' slipped away Parameshi, even before stepping into the house. 'Why are you sleeping like this avva? Get up. Go wash your face and sit on the bed.' The minute he pulled off her sheet, she began to wail. Rudreshi sat beside her, put his arms round her shoulders and closed her mouth. 'You shouldn't cry, avanni. You have faced so many difficult situations. What has come over you now? Am I

not here like Eerabhadra? After all, problems come to only human beings, don't they? Common get up.'

Santavva almost melted at these words. 'I should not be living, son. Times are very bad. That Honnoorappa... why should I live any longer? I'm just waiting to go away,' she sobbed. 'What did that bastard do to you, tell me. I shall take care of him. Her son's presence, his touch, the consoling words had brought back half her energy. Looking around to make sure nobody was around, she blew her nose into her pallu and said: 'I can't say anything here. Let's go to our shed in the farm.' If sister-in-law marveled at mother-in-law's instant recovery, sisters wondered if their brother had cast a spell on their mother looking at her charge behind Rudreshi like a bull.

When they sat beneath the Banyan tree, Santavva who had by then come back to normal, said, 'Honnoorappa is jealous that we are doing well, son. Especially after we took back our land from him. The fact that I have had no support from men has always kept me quiet. That is the mistake I made. The day previous to amavasye, I had gone to the fields. Honnorappa came there and said he would get a canal dug across our field. With all patience I asked him why he was doing this. To have a canal dug over another's field is not fair, I told him. 'You acquired all this by going to bed with Rangaswamappa. You're trying to tell me what is right and what is wrong. This is what happens when a poor woman becomes rich overnight. If I don't take water over your field should I take it over your father's grave? You want to flourish while the rest suffer, is it?' He yelled. 'How much patience do you expect me to have? Okay, let's assume that I have made a living by going to bed with people. But I don't go to bed by the side of the fence for a packet of sweets like your daughter-in-law,' I said. That bastardgot very wild. You talk about my daughter-in-law. The best thing to do to you is to beat you up with slippers and defile your caste,' he said and came jumping towards me and beat me with his slippers.'

She gave vent to all sorrows she had held back until then and began to weep. Rudreshi, who was extremely angry,

stood not knowing what to do and what to say. He knew what kind of an effect it would have on someone like his mother who held on to religious beliefs. 'Avva, don't cry,' he said softly. 'I haven't disclosed this to anybody Rudri. He defiled my caste at the fag end of my life. Rudranna, should I live any longer? If I performed rites to get back into my caste, I fear I will lose all respect.' He put his hands on his mother's mouth and said, 'Don't talk of dying. I will handle the situation and see that you are back into the community,' he assured her, taking her with him.

Four

Rudreshi tossed on his bed the entire night. Just about two years ago, his religious avva had sought blessings from their religious head. In her life, god had played a very important role. She perhaps could not have lived without believing in god. It was at that moment that he saw the split in her personality. Though her will to respond to Honnoorappa with a 'slipper treatment' on the one hand, on the other her piety had been badly hurt and she desired to give up life. Avva was forcing death on herself. Her innate desire to live was overwhelming her hope for death. She was just marginally away from her desire to love. What should I do to restore this?

Rudreshi, who was waiting for daybreak, left with a spade on his shoulder, not even waiting to have breakfast. As he walked past the verandah, Santavva's eyes sparkled, while his sister-in-law and sisters became dull. His sister-in-law ran to her husband: 'Get up. Rudranna took a spade and walked away somewhere!' she said anxiously. Parameshi, knowing well that he could not do anything, did not even remove the sheet from his face.

By the time Honnoorappa reached the fields with his cattle and plough, he saw Rudreshi covering the canal with his spade like a man possessed. Though Honnoorappa had always feared Rudreshi, he had done the slipper deed in a fit. When he did not hear about it from anybody, even a month

after the incident, he was extremely happy. 'Why would she go around telling people that her caste had been defiled?' he thought. When he heard Santavva was going to die he was happy that things would become easier if she did. But what was happening now? He traced back his steps and returned with ten men. By then, Rudreshi had closed the entire canal. Thinking of the money he had spent on it Honnoorappa exploded. 'Who gave you permission to close it, you son of an ass!' That was reason enough for Rudreshi to plunge into the warfield. 'Who gave you permission to dig a canal in our field, you rogue?' asked Rudreshi. 'Hey! You son of a widow, you better talk with respect. My father is old enough to be your grandfather, how dare you address him in singular!' Honnoorappa's son said angrily. 'Even dogs and donkeys get old. First ask your father to give respect. Then I will also be respectful. Do you think I am one of your slaves?' asked Rudreshi with indifference as he levelled the ground with his feet. 'What Rudranna, early in the morning you are in a mood to quarrel, is it? Is it right to close the canal?' asked Nanjayya, Honnoorappa's brother-in-law in a pacifying tone. Rudreshi flared up at this. 'I thought you would ask them if it was right digging up other's fields. Instead you ask if I am right,' he said. 'Why do you talk to that swine, I say? Come, let's dig it again,' Hoonoorappa said defiantly, enthusing his men. Rudreshi threw his spade. 'Don't Honnoorappa. Were you born to Manaiah to dig a canal in Santavva's field?' he asked. Honnoorappa could not take it, when Rudreshi who he had seen as a little boy, ask him a question about his birth. 'You son of a bitch, you talk about my origins? Even if I go to jail it is fine. I am going to murder you.' Rudreshi laughed and said, 'Where do you possess that kind of manliness? All you can do is boss over widows.' At this, Honnoorappa's son went to attack Rudreshi.

The servants were watching all this! Honnoorappa, who had watched several films with his son and knew how to escape from being beaten, could do nothing to escape the rage of Rudreshi. The angry young man too off his slippers, the one that had been hung in front of his to ward off his evil

spirits and rained blows with them on Honnoorappa's back. Honnoorappa was benumbed.

Five

The Panchayat met a week later. There was a reason behind this delay. Primarily, Honnoorappa had no intention of proclaiming to the village that Rudreshi had beaten him up and that his caste had been defiled. Neither did his friends have such intentions. But Rudreshi wanted to tell the whole village about it. As he was returning from the fields he told people along the way that he had beaten Honnoorappa with his slippers and defiled his caste. The very next day, he went to Nanjangud, got his head shaved, called the priest, performed the necessary rituals to get back into the caste fold and gave a mutton feast to all his relatives in the village. He did all this with tremendous ease. The others, didn't give much importance to Santavva too taking part in these rituals. Honnoorappa didn't have much to hide now. Added to this, the servants were also giggling about it. If the man who had beaten should handle things thus, how should the man who had beaten up handle it? With the hope of getting the expenses from Rudreshi, Honnoorappa had summoned the panchayat at the village hall.

The hall was full, buzzing with people. People were surprised to see Santavva, who a couple of days ago was said to be on the death bed sitting up looking all the more charming with the sacred ash adorning her forehead. Rudreshi had smeared his entire shaven head with sacred ash. 'What Rudreshi? Is it true that you beat Honnoorappa with your footwear?' began Nadagowdaru, at which Rudreshi wanted to giggle but controlled himself. Rubbing his forehead he said, 'Yes, gowdare.' 'Could you do this to someone who is of your grandfather's age?' he asked. 'The father and son came to murder me. This happened in the heat of the moment,' he explained. 'Utter lies, gowdare. It seems last amavasye when my father had a fight with Santavva, he hit her with his footwear. He has done this only to settle scores,'

blurted out Hoonoorappa's son. All eyes were now on Santavva. She looked unperturbed. 'Can one believe this, gowdare? Just because I beat him up, I shaved my head and the family to a mutton feast as per the rituals. If he had beaten up avva, do you think we would have kept quiet until now? For us, family respect is of utmost importance gowdare.' There was no reason to disbelieve Rudreshi. Honnoorappa, who had put his head down, began to feel a vacuum enveloping the whole place. All his calculations had gone wrong. He suddenly rose up to the situation and said, 'Don't listen to him, gowdare. To beat someone like Santavva, I am not a fatherless boy like Rudreshi. He has accepted that he hit me. Let him bear the cost of all the rituals plus 500 rupees penalty.' Rudreshi agreed instantly.

The very next day, he put on a lovely hat and set out for the city. A relieved Santavva went to the bus stand to see him off. But for three people, nobody else knew what had really happened.

Translated by
Deepa Ganesh

THE BIRTH

Sara Aboobacker

Sara Aboobacker, born on June 30, 1936 in Kasargod, Kerala, is a well-known Kannada fiction writer. Her stories narrate Muslim lives in the areas bordering Karnataka and Kerala, focusing on the inequities and injustices meted out to women by the male society. Her stories are simple narratives, devoid of linguistic or stylistic adornments, but full of indignation and concern. She has gained immense popularity and recognition by virtue of the fact that she is perhaps the only woman writer to have emerged from the Muslim community in this region and demonstrated immense courage in taking up issues on behalf of the women of her community through her writings. She has seven novels, four collections of short stories, and one collection of essays to her credit.

THE BIRTH

For the past two days Khatija was living in unbearable pain. Even now there were no sign of her giving birth to a baby. She tried to keep the pain to herself as much as possible. At times she felt like screaming but she was dreaded by the thought that others might hear it. Often struggling she would sigh 'Ya Allah'.

'Without experiencing pain, is it possible to give birth to a child?' Saying so the midwife consoled Khatija. The midwife was under stress which was evident by the wrinkles on her forehead. She had seen a lot of pain, suffering and struggling of this kind. 'Birth without pain cannot be birth at all.' She says for all the pain there should be a birth.

Pain always starts in a small way. It is not constant. Gradually the pain increases but as a woman gets used to it, the pain becomes bearable is it not?

Khatija was anxious whether she would be able to give birth to this child.

When had she first got familiar with pain? This was not a recent experience. It had started long back. She remembered that day.

She had finished her class IV and was promoted to the class V. But as she had stepped into her eleventh year she had to' discontinue her education. Shocked by this clever girl's absence to school, the teacher went in search of her and arrived at her house.

'Come in teacher, please sit down.' Welcomed Khatija's mother. Without wasting much time the teacher explained why she was there.

'Look' Umma, your daughter is gifted with intelligence. She is always the topper and let her continue her studies. She has got a bright future...' Before she could complete her talk, the mother interrupted her.

'Teacher, what are you saying? She has to get married within a year. When will she learn the household chores if she attends school? What will our girls achieve by studying? Will she be allowed to take up a job?'

Hearing them discuss about her marriage, Khatija's face flushed red, and, she ran inside. She was deeply grieved that she could not attend classes anymore. Could the day ever pass without the fun, the laughter, the stories, the singing and dancing in school?

The pain seemed trivial. Initially the pain is like that. It was something that could go away unnoticed; and could soon be forgotten. As she presumed, pain always begins in a small way.

On the wedding night she was just thirteen. Her eyes filled with pleasant dreams, with mehandi on her hand, they still remained afresh in her mind.

But...

The dreams had remained just dreams of teenage fantasy. She never had a chance to turn them into reality: Her husband seemed a lot older than she was. Neither seemed happy with the other. He was absolutely not able to touch her heart. He was like a bee which had come to suck the honey out of a flower. He was just unaware of the softness, beauty and fragrance of the flower. He never thought that even a flower has its own world and he was just a guest amidst there. He became a dictator.

Yet another pain. The sorrow and unhappiness. This time the shadow of the pain spread all over the face. Her mother could feel the pain within her daughter.

'All the men are the same, child. So what if your husband is a little older than you are?

But... The pain, still evident and remained on her face forever. Submerging all the pain, three years passed by.

This time the pain came suddenly, violently and sent a shiver down her spine.

That day...

She had not got her periods for a month now. So there was hope. But one night when he arrived, she was keeping

her bed separately. 'What? Isn't there any sign of having a baby? He asked rudely. 'Is it my fault?' she asked feebly.

'What are you suggesting? Do you think it is my fault?' His voice turned more into a growl. She thought silence was the best reply.

'Look. I can't wait long. I want a baby within a year.'

She shuddered hearing this command. She had to give birth to a child within a year. But how? She ran to her mother for rescue. She took all the medicines possible. Even then she could not conceive. The womb remained barren. A year passed.

Yet she remained childless.

Pain. Yet came another pain. Like waves in the ocean.

That evening as she was engrossed in her dream of nursing a baby on her lap, she saw her husband entering the gate with a suitcase in his hand. She was about to go in, to make tea for him. But she was shocked by what she saw then. Dressed like a bride, a woman walked behind him into her house. She felt she had been stabbed in the heart. Who was she? Who was this stranger, a woman entering her house? What was she doing here?

Walking past Khatija, without even glancing at her, he called the other woman inside. Khatija, still stunned, followed them. She did not have the right to ask who the woman was. Did she? He led the woman to their room. Handing over the suitcase to her, he asked her to change. Khatija just stared at him with a confused look.

'What are you staring at? I have been waiting for a child since long. You have made me lose my patience. So I got married to this woman.'

The lightening and thunder having struck, will the rainfall be away? Unbearable pain. She wanted to scream. But she could not. She thought she would faint.

The midwife consoled her, saying, 'It is not yet time, child, bear with it.'

That time might never come; Khatija thought.

Her husband's second wife's name was Ayesha. Khatija's room was Ayesha's now. He showed his authority over her too.

One day, he called Khatija and told her, 'I had given you a golden necklace that day. Now give it to Ayesha.'

'I want it. It is mine.' It was the first time Khatija had dared to speak against him. In reply he slapped her against her cheek and yelled, 'Do as I say. Or else leave this house and go to your mother.'

'Mother's house'. She thought. 'A house without a father, being run and dominated by brothers.' Anywhere it is hell. Where is the difference?'

She could cope with the pain. Gradually she had got used to it.

Ayesha soon gave birth to children. Even though Ayesha looked after most matters in the house, Khatija did not become a slave. Ayesha's children called her 'Doddamma' meaning elder mother. What if the children were not hers? They brought a new life to her too.

Not being able to be with Ayesha when she delivered for the second time, her husband came in search of Khatija. It was still afresh in her mind. Using her as he pleased and discarding into a corner when not in need. With all these humiliations, did she ever have a choice? Though being insulted often, she could not raise her voice. Endless pain.

Even amidst immense pain, there was some pleasantness. What could not happen with the pundits medicines, now without any effort it yielded results. When Khatija began to experience morning sickness and nausea, Ayesha felt a bitter sense of envy and anger. When Khatija was in a state of euphoria, Ayesha had silently begun to grow with rage.

'He did not even have the patience to wait for one or two years' Khatija thought. The pain seemed to be everlasting.

By the time Ayesha became the mother of five Khatija had three children. The family was growing and the expenses were going beyond the limits.

One morning her husband called Khatija and told her, 'It has been a long time since your father died. Go, ask your brother to give you your share of the property.' She felt her

life had become a kind of child's play and she was only a puppet.

'Didn't we get you married? Didn't we give you gold? Didn't we provide enough dowry to your husband? What more do you want? Do you think we are rich enough to provide you money any time you ask? When all your sisters were married off we were left with only a small shop. Now, does your husband expect us to give him a part of the small shop? Let him get married four more times so that he can ask his share from all of them! Hasn't your husband got any shame? Did he ever feel your pain all these years?' This was the reply she got from her brothers when Khatija asked them for her share of the property.

When she related this to her husband he was enraged and fiercely replied, 'So your brother refused to give your share. If you step into your mother's house again don't ever think of coming back. Take it as talaq from me.'

Husband's command is like God's command. Isn't it?

Pain. 'God, I can't take it any more.'

She moaned. The midwife consoled her saying 'a few more pains and it will be born,' 'Then I will be dead' Khatija thought.

It had been four years since she had seen her mother. The last time she had complications in her delivery, she had been taken to the hospital. Even then she was not able to meet her mother. Khatija's husband was adamant that there should not be any kind of contact between the two families, the mother and daughter.

When her mother sent some medicine through Aisamma, her husband came to know about it. In his anger he took the medicines and threw them out. Khatija controlled her tears.

Pain. Why does the pain just remain in tears? Why doesn't it come out in voice?

That day...

That day Aisamma had come. 'Your mother slipped from the stairs and broke her back. She has been hospitalised. And she wants to see you one last time if she is to die.'

'Tell my mother that her daughter is no more.' Controlling her tears she ran inside.

How had she got used to these pains! She did not have an answer. Anxiety clearly showed on her face.

Her mother did not die. She had been discharged from the hospital after two months. Had she promised that she would not die without seeing her daughter?

This time when she became pregnant, she did not have any strength. She was feeling weak.

The food did not seem to be doing any good. Her eldest daughter Sumayya was now attending school. She must be educated, nothing should come in the way of her studies, Khatija was thinking.

Though weak she would not rest for a while, could not stay away from the kitchen. On that day her husband excitedly looking at her bloated tummy, exclaimed,

'This time I am going on a Haj Pilgrimage.'

The bowl of curry in her hand fell down 'What has happened to your hands'? Can't it bear the weight of a single bowl?' He screamed Ayesha too joined him, 'I can't prepare curry again!' saying so she left the kitchen angrily.

The next day, when everything appeared calm Khatija told him,

'My delivery date is due next month. Can't you go to Mecca next time?'

'Not possible.' He said impatiently. 'I have been trying to go there for the last three years. Are you stopping me from doing religious rituals? Don't you have any fear of God?' Then he continued calmly. 'Don't worry. I will pray for you.'

'If you are not here, I will go to my mother's place.' She said hoping he would agree.

Lightning and thunder struck again.

'What?' He shouted. 'Mother? The mother who refused to give her daughter her share of the property? Don't talk about your family in my presence... what kind of a woman are you? Why do you still want to be with your family?'

Thunder and lightning became severe.

'After I leave for Mecca, don't start making plans to go to your mother's place Even if you die while giving birth, your mother should not get the news. This is my order. Did you get it?'

Another stab in her heart. This time the pain started from her back and she felt it may cut her body into pieces This may be the last pain, the midwife thought and prepared to receive the baby.

But... Khatija was not able to give birth. She swallowed the pain and thought this baby will never be born. She knew she could not take it any more. She knew her end was nearing. She told the midwife weakly to call her daughter.

'Sumayya, come here.' She called her daughter. She struggled to get the words out of her mouth.

She just gazed at her ten year old daughter.

'What Umma'?' asking so, Sumayya leaned closely to her mother. Her eyes were swollen.

Holding her daughter close to her, Khatija managed to whisper.

'Child,' I can't give birth anymore.' She began, 'I don't have the strength... It was my fate that I had to... experience so much pain. Tomorrow my mother... that is your grandma and your uncles will surely come to see my dead body. Nobody can separate the blood. When they come you go back with them... There is nobody that can stop you now. God always will be with you. You study hard and learn to stand on your own feet...' Wiping tears from her eyes she continued very weakly, 'What could not be born within me, let it born within you'.

Translated by
Fathima Natalia &
Rajashree Kamath

THE INNER LIFE

Vaidehi

Vaidehi (real name Janaki Srinivasa Murthy), born in 1945, in Kundapura, Dakshina Kannada District, is a well-known Kannada fiction writer and poet, renowned for her espousal of the cause of women. Her creative self blossomed as a result of her encounters with patriarchy, in search of her personal freedom. For instance, daring to sit on a chair was, for her, one of the heroic feats she accomplished in her childhood, in defiance of the social injunction that girls should not sit on chairs in presence of the male members of the family, let alone male members from outside. She longed for the freedom that she was denied on account of being a woman, but enjoyed in full measure by her brothers. She uses her pen as an effective weapon for social transformation.

THE INNER LIFE

'You report all kinds of things, wanted and unwanted. If you could write about me that would be something.' This is how Chikkamma teases me generally. Your report is no news at all, but a sheer waste of time,' she says.

'Make news, then, and I'd have no problem reporting that. After all, it's my job,' I reply. The tete-a-tete often ends lightheartedly.

I have been staying with her for a month now. Before I came, there was Vrinda; even before her, Champa. Chikkamma is a woman who insists on keeping one or the other relative's daughter with her while she is studying. Vrinda, my sister, was just about to complete her studies when I came on transfer. Appa wouldn't agree to my staying elsewhere. Anyway, Chikkamma wouldn't let me do that. So it is now my turn instead of the students. When I arrived, Vrinda had another week for her studies to conclude. 'Are-you going to stay here until your next transfer?' She looked aghast.

Vrinda disliked Chikkamma. There was no particular reason except that Chikkamma irritated her intolerably. The exasperation was not for want of food or love. In fact, it was due to surfeit of affection. For Vrinda, the biggest annoyance was that she had to be home before dusk. There were times when she couldn't help returning after dark, and Chikkamma, although not angry would get anxious. 'Strange Chikkamma', began Vrinda. Whenever she protested that nothing would happen to her, Chikkamma would retort, 'Something will happen to me, not to you.' Vrinda told me how she made Kalyani, the maidservant, stay with her until Vrinda came back, even though Chikkappa was at home. 'I believe she's always behaved like this. All those who have studied here earlier gradually open up... Vrinda went on and on 'On our college Union Day, it was late at night. You know how hard it is to leave early I was quite worried when I came home late. I thought Chikkamma would have gone to sleep. But no. While Kalyani had gone home, she kept standing alone at the gate... like a ghost! Hey, I'm not making it up. For a moment, she looked just as people do in those negatives of yours! A ghost, with no light in its eyes! I wonder where that blank gaze disappeared the minute she saw me! 'Ayyabba, you have come at last' she said 'Here you are, at last...' she said again while going inside. 'Come on, Chikkamma, did you think I would elope with someone?' I was furious. 'That's not easy, forget it,' she said! That is why I say she is a weird Chikkamma. And Chikkappa? He is worthless... too gentle. I should have been her husband, I would have made her dance to my tune...' said Vrinda, 'But I am not... God is Great.'

'Don't say that. Tell me, who shows that much care these days?'

Why should anyone? Care! Let her care for herself — why me? That's not normal kind of caring, mind you. You can listen to the entire story and enjoy it if you please. From the day I came, she has slept in my room, in that cot on that side. If only for a day she went to her own room! I can't even stretch myself and sleep as I wish... Phew! What an inspector!'

'You deserve that In spite of Amma scolding you repeatedly, you never learned to sleep properly!'

Wait, there's more May be she thinks I'm still too young. Don't I understand that much? What would Chikkappa think? Won't he take me for a nuisance between them? If I say, 'You go Chikkamma. I am not scared. I am used to sleeping alone,' she says, 'Go? Where to? Am I a bride, just married, to go to my room and latch it?' Once... ayyabba, I begin to shudder when I think now... my throat goes dry... only I could have endured it for so long, I swear... I wonder how! If it had been you...

'Enough of your harikatha now. Tell me what happened.'

You know what? It was midnight. I heard Chikkappa calling Chikkamma in a hushed tone. What a tone it was! Oh my God, why had I not slept! I began to sweat... the way he called! I slept with my ears stuffed with the bed sheet. This Chikkamma! She neither responded nor went out! I heard Chikkappa entering the room. My throat went so dry, had I been standing I would surely have collapsed. Fortunately, I was lying down.'

'Let that be, tell me what happened then?'

'Let that be? How can you understand my plight? Whatever you say Akka, one should not let young women stay in other people's homes.'

Where was that little Vrinda who had left home for her studies?

Ignoring what she said, I smiled. 'Fine. Let that be, madam, tell me what happened.'

'Smile... what is that for! Yes, Chikkamma got up and followed Chikkappa. She's gone at last... No problem any more, I thought.'

'Lying face down, with legs flung on either side, you believed you could sleep the way you wanted...'

'Ayyo, don't interrupt, listen... Both whispered something. Chikkappa clasped Chikkamma's hands. Chikkamma followed him, casually releasing her hands. The moment Chikkappa crossed the threshold; she latched it behind him and returned to sleep!' Softly she called out 'Vrinda' to find out if I was actually asleep or not. Would I respond? I slept harder than I could believe possible. We grew up seeing no such thing... right? How can I tell this to Appa and Amma? If I tell them, they might scold me so much that my youth might wither away at once! If I say, 'It's a nuisance to Chikkappa,' they might retort, 'Why do you want all that, how do you know... you have all these nasty thoughts! Where did you learn all this?' or at worst, 'Stop going to college and come back home...' That's it. Which is why I have spent my days here without uttering a word...'

Instead of simply saying, 'Just when I am all set to leave such a Chikkamma's house, you have come! Your fate,'

Vrinda had narrated all this. 'Do you call this her goodness? Not at all, my sister...' she had sneered dramatically.

'You've become very sharp!'

Although Vrinda and I shared the room, Chikkamma did not leave the cot in the corner. 'It's okay Chikkamma. You can go to your...' Even before I could complete the sentence, Chikkamma sniffed daintily, 'Did this girl teach you to say so? My room will be there: Where will it go?... I shall continue to sleep here. Don't worry' She spoke with resolve. 'Don't worry.' Chikkamma always uses such handy English words for emphasis. Arguments do not change the determined. But, why make people like us stay in her house... and why smother us?

Vrinda left, wishing me the best of luck. It is now turn here as she said. I can't be late home; I can't stay anywhere for a single night. But, there is never a trace of anger, exasperation, or misgiving in Chikkamma. There could have been a way out had she felt all that. The entire affair could have ended in brisk arguments. I could have gone back home, tried to convince my patents that Chikkamma said this and that, and that she made my stay miserable there. But Chikkamma would not be trapped so easily. As Vrinda had said, if I were to explain at home what the situation is, I may have to listen to a lecture on Chikkamma's concern rather than find a fair hearing for my problem of curtailment of my freedom.

Inevitably I would sometimes be late returning home. Ceremony, seminar, meeting, accident, this, that... most of the times, as Chikkamma said, inessential engagements. Well that is my profession. Whether one likes it or not, one has to report an event if it is news. You have to report the words of a speaker as his own even if he reads without understanding what someone else — has written for him. Questions and analyses arise later. You can scorn nothing, not even a mediocre discussion or seminar. At times, I used to it would have been more meaningful for me if instead of taking up this job, I had sat at home, reading, and writing something for myself. I don't mean to say it is always so trivial. Reports too

can be of consequence. Is there any reporter who has not been witness to some change in the society caused by a report she published?

This strange Chikkamma occupies so much of my 'life while I am stuck with these different thoughts. Although I am normally late at night, she waits at the gate every time. Vrinda was not wrong. She looks just like a human figure in a negative. Why keep us with her in this way? And why behave as though burdened with a great responsibility? That her manner transforms and she looks elated the moment she sees me is very evident — Vrinda had told me even this! When I write 'Dear Vrinda, you have truly become sensitive,' she writes back, 'But you're a nitwit. Take it from me. Despite my warning and your ability to earn, you continue to stay in their house just because Appa said so! Walk out to a hostel. Let them be by themselves. 'What does Chikkamma think? That we are infants staying in her house? Vrinda's letter is just as her talk. Once begun, it refuses to end. One needs leisure to read it.

Yes. Her face changes and she becomes buoyant the moment she sees me. Inside, Chikkappa would be snoring away. Despite my companionship, she did not seem to acquire anything of Chikkappa's untroubled demeanour!

Poor fellow. In a way, Chikkappa is blockheaded. He keeps to himself once he has eaten his fill. 'He has been so, right from his early days — relishes tasty; savoury food. Those who don't cook for him are sinners... my grandmother used to say. She was relieved to have her son married to a girl who cooked well. Chikkappa's questions can be effortlessly listed, no impertinence anywhere. 'Did you have food? Could you sleep well? I hope mosquitoes didn't trouble you, come for lunch, have breakfast, have some more what is the special news from our reporter?' and so on. After breakfast, he goes off to his office and returns only in the evening. He has something or the other to relate, about the town, about other people. Chikkamma listens with interest too. She too has thins to tell him, about the I household — that the dal he brought the other day was no good; the rice was of excellent

quality and more must be brought before the stock with the grocer is over; that the gardener who promised to come did not turn up; that Kalyani has lb be paid...

How amiably they converse! A model of verbal camaraderie. I have not seen Appa and Amma chat this way even for a day. Talking about this and that, after supper, Chikkappa falls asleep in no time. I assume he sleeps. But going by the incident Vrinda narrated, when he falls out of sleep and into desire... is unpredictable! Thank God, I haven't yet seen what she told me. Maybe because it's been just. a month since I came, or maybe there is hesitation because I'm a grown woman... Whatever it may be, it is not right for me to stay here. Somehow, I must wriggle out of this arrangement. 'Chikkamma, why should you do this? Why put us in distress? Chikkappa is a poor fellow, doesn't say a word, yes. But yours is, an obsession with obligation. It's too much. Do you think we don't understand? Either you go to your room or I shall go to a hostel... I must tell her this. One fine day, I must tell her and set out.

Drafting my words, correcting them in my head, the days flew by. How about taking leave for a few days and going somewhere? The mind will perhaps relax. It could become easier to express what I wanted to. I would gather courage to talk to Appa and Amma after thinking about the matter in a secluded place.

'Chikkamma, I have applied for leave. I'm going on a short tour for a few days,' I said.

'Where to?' she asked at once.

'Just like that. I want to ramble around Kalasa and Horanadu with a camera in hand.'

'Alone?'

I realized the mistake I had made. Despite knowing her, I had not answered prudently. Sometimes it happens, doesn't it? The brain ceases to work or works in the opposite direction. Or else, why should a not-so-straightforward girl like me share the truth as if I am the most sincere person?

'I shall accompany you, come on — wants to go alone, she says...!'

'No Chikkamma, I didn't mean it. How can I, a coward, go alone? I am going along with some of my girlfriends (if I said boyfriends she would insist on coming with me). Roving alone, me? My goodness!'

'Return soon. Don't stay away for more than tour days,' Chikkamma appealed.

This must have been the nth time.

When I peeped out of the auto-rickshaw at the turn of the street, I saw her still standing at the gate... My mind softened towards her as I went further away from her. Without frowning, without being rude, without letting me miss my bus, how punctually she cooked for me! If only she stopped waiting...

I looked back again. She was still there, standing. What! She looked like an orphaned calf! I hope my mind is not fabricating ideas.

Four days passed like four minutes. Isn't this how you feel amidst nature? Free from the cycle of time. It fills fresh air into a withered soul, enables the body to face the world again. This is how the landscape around Kalasa and Horanadu is! And there was my camera To realize how the camera not just grasps things but also silently listens to one's mind, one should wander alone with it How would Vrinda respond if I told her this? 'Right Then, why don't you buy me a camera too?' she would say. Listen my girl, how I yearned to buy a camera I had to get a job to buy one for myself Appa does not know about this yet He'll begin the same old Ramayana if he realizes that I waste money on film rolls and save nothing for my marriage Don't you know, Vrinda. But it is not the same with you Wait for a few months, I shall buy you a camera, but on one condition When you begin to earn, you must buy one for some other girl You should practice photography to an extent at least The camera was listening, smiling, clicking, as if it perceived the inner voice and its meaning just as it captured scenes and their significance.

Frankly, I did not know how four days flew Days fly like birds! Without wings, without the flapping sound. The way days fly is in itself poetry. What is poetry but the lap of the everyday, and the mundane?

I must look out for a room or a hostel after reaching home, cautiously tell Chikkappa and Chikkamma what I want to say, and Tack up I am no toddler to obey them if they stop me I must challenge Appa if he refuses to understand that staying in somebody's house meant damage to either our freedom or theirs, and drive some sense into him What's the use if I cannot talk smartly even now!

It was evening when I returned.

'She has come, Amma' — Kalyani's voice I paid the rickshaw driver, and turned to see Chikkamma descending the doorsteps Pressing his hands to the upper frame of the door, Chikkappa asked, 'Ho, you have come?' One of the typical offerings from his box of questions! I smiled. Wah re wah! What a jubilant smile! (The mind is now a rogue after listening to Vrinda Don't I know? I should not bother about its mischief. What is victorious about that smile? Chikkappa looks buoyant A little obviously, that's all).

'Kalyani, take her bags and keep them inside,' said Chikkamma. Does the twilight have a dismal look to it? Chikkamma had neatly combed her hair and worn flowers... She was not Chikkamma! 'Come... come... at last you came!'... She is evading. My eyes! What, what could it be? What is the matter, Chikkamma...?

Her elusive eyes swiftly passed through me. I gazed at her. There — Chikkamma was not there! The woman there was not Chikkamma!... A tired harlot! Why couldn't I see her all these days? From where did she surface in just these four days?

The reporter in me woke up in apprehension.

'Come... come in... did you enjoy the tour?' Chikkamma ascended the steps, clasping my hand. 'At last... you've come!'

'Why don't you talk? Tired, aren't you? I have made juice for you, drink it up... then have a bath... As Chikkamma came in talking, the pensive reporter in me stood still.

Now is the time to report... How do I, Chikkamma? About whom, between you and me? And to whom?

Dear Vrinda, all you got was the negative. I have seen the positive. I will not leave Chikkamma any more, at least not until I am transferred.

Dear sister, you are a dimwit... Not me, you.

No, you!

Translated by
Nayana Kashyap

A STORY IN THIS WAY

Veena Shanteshwara

Veena Shanteshwara is among the most radical voices among women writers in Kannada. Through her works, she has constantly upheld the individuality of women. Veena Shanteshwara is a scholar in English, Hindi and Marathi, and has to her credit 27 works, including five short story collections and two novels in Kannada, research papers in English, and eight works of translation from Hindi, English and Marathi into Kannada.

A STORY IN THIS WAY

It was on an evening just like this, ten years ago. Those were early days of the monsoon season. The city of Mumbai which literally burned the whole day in the scorching sun was cooling down in the mild evening drizzle and becoming fresh. Instead of hurrying along as usual with everyone else anxious to catch the local train or bus after office, she ambled along on the edge of the footpath, slowly, wanting to get wet and cool. She had come to Mumbai from Malnad. Though several years had passed since she had come here for a job, she could not still tolerate the heat in this place. Every year she would look forward to the monsoons, and when it rained she would enjoy getting herself as wet as she could in the rains. But when the rainy season got over, a sense of discontentment would remain. Every time she would feel, 'Che! It did not rain enough this time' or 'I didn't get drenched enough this time'. She would then spend the rest of the year looking forward to the monsoons again.

'Hello Madam...' — when a scooter coming from behind had suddenly halted by her side, she had stopped and turned to look.

He was a probationary officer who had come a month ago from Delhi for training; she was quite drawn to this man who was always reserved; a gentleman —

'Hello', she had replied in turn with a smile.

'Madam, do you like soaking in the rains like this?' He had asked. Though it was the first time he was speaking to her, he had come directly to the point, without any introduction, as if he had long known her.

'Yes, I like it very much', she had admitted without feeling embarrassed.

'Then come with me. Instead of this noisy, crowded road the tranquil sea shore is a good place to soak oneself in the rain. I too will soak in the rains with you. Will you come?' No compulsion, only a gentle persuasion in the question.

For a moment she had stared at him. The next instant she got on to his scooter and sat in the pillion seat.

That's how the two of them went on together.

*

Earlier, on a number of occasions there were several other men who had asked her, 'Will you come?' — when she had newly joined the office as a clerk; later, when she had become an officer after passing a number of exams; her colleagues who had worked along with her; her superiors who came and went; in the office, on the way, in parties; she hadn't really felt like going with any one of them. She was alone in every sense in this big city of Mumbai.

That's when he had entered her life. After that, in these ten years, she was never again alone. He was always with her — in the room, in the office, on the way, in the market, at the cinema, in hotels, on the sea shore, in meetings, on office tours, here-there-everywhere — the two of them had spent days and years together.

His training was for a period of one year. After that, with some difficulty, he had managed to get a transfer to Mumbai for her sake. From then on their life together had acquired a rhythm and routine. In the beginning a couple of times every year, he would go to Delhi for a few days to visit his people. She too would time her visit to her relatives then, and would get roundly scolded by them for the kind of life that she was leading, and come back weary from their advice. As time went by, both of them stopped going to their respective homes. Instead, they would both take leave from their office and spend time together in tourist spots and holiday resorts. Being content and comfortable in each other's company, they had become quite used to this life that had no fetters and obligations. They had no demands from each other, nor any demurral; there were neither expectations nor disappointments in their relationship.

He-and-she, the two of them seemed to be quite made for each other.

Of course, people gossiped. But how long would they gossip? In the end they just fell silent. In any case, the two of them rarely took to heart or hardly bothered about what people said about them.

*

When ten years had passed in this way with the two together and without a care in the world, but not without happiness, she began to show some signs of ill-health. Feeling tired and queasy, she had to make a few trips to the lady doctor whom she knew. Finally one day the doctor told her in a low voice, 'You're pregnant — it's already two months now'.

'Is it?' she asked, unable to say anything else. She was petrified, stunned, overcome by a vague fear, but above all gripped by excitement. All those emotions she had thought till then she did not have crowded into her.

The doctor who knew about her circumstances said, 'You give it a thought and come back in some time', and sent her away with a reassuring pat on her back.

She came home. For the first time in their ten years together, she became aware that she was awaiting his return home. She made a futile attempt to imagine what a properly wedded woman, pregnant for the first time would be feeling, how her husband would respond to her when she shyly gave him the news, how the two of them would then go on to talk of their to-be born child. She chided herself for being sentimental, and tried to hold her emotions in check.

That night he came home late. 'I had got a trunk call from Delhi. My mother's health it seems is precarious', he said. They had dinner together. They cleaned up the table together. They washed a couple of dishes together. They did everything as usual together. While they were doing all this together, she was feeling quite agitated inside her, and the more she tried to suppress her agitation, the more it became palpable to her. She also felt some anger at her long-time companion for not noticing how she was feeling. The next instant she felt ashamed for expecting that from him and for feeling angry that her expectations have been thwarted. 'How have I become so immature today? Isn't it wrong?' she mused.

When the two got into bed together however he did notice that all was not right and asked, 'You seem to be quite worn out today?'

'No, not really', she replied.

What followed was the usual routine, as it was every day. Later, as he was drawing the bed cover over himself, she said slowly, 'The doctor said today that I am going to be a mother'.

She did not say 'you are going to be a father'.

'What? What are you going to be?' he asked in disbelief. His surprised reaction was not entirely unexpected. They had never used between them such meaningless relationship-signifying terms as 'husband', 'wife', 'mother', 'father', 'children'. She corrected herself and said, 'It seems I am pregnant'.

'Oh' he said in the same placid tone as usual. She was lying beside him engrossed in the emotions welling up inside her over which she seemed to have no control, without bothering to imagine what his state of mind was. Before falling asleep, he only said, 'I may have to go to Delhi tomorrow'.

'You may go', she said cheerily.

He slept without a worry as he had complete faith in her ability to act decisively. And with the same lack of worry, he also went away to Delhi the next day. He came back after fifteen days and asked her, 'Is everything alright?' She did not respond. For the first time, he was shaken out of composure and became agitated: 'What is this? Why did you not go to the doctor and get it cleaned up?'

'Because I didn't want to do that'.

For a moment he was stunned, but the next instant he recovered and smilingly enquired, 'Oh, were you waiting for me to come back? Alright. Let's go this evening'. She was quiet. In the evening she refused to go with him to the doctor to get her womb emptied out. From then on arose their differences of opinion; arguments; discussions; antagonism; estrangement.

'What kind of madness is this? Are you going to give birth to a baby? What is to be done with the baby? Won't that baby signal the end of all our freedom? Besides... besides...' he hesitated.

'Besides what?' she asked sharply.

'We don't have the right to give birth to this baby. We are not husband and wife in the eyes of the law. Can't you understand even this?' he felt very awkward to spell it out like this.

She laughed. 'You too talk like this about law like other common people! To have a baby is a woman's birthright. It is entirely my wish. I don't need your advice'.

'Is this a way of pressurizing me to marry you?' he asked quite clueless.

'Chi...' She was becoming really very angry now. 'What an allegation he is making against me. When confronted with problems, do people's minds get distorted in this way? Is there no end to his misunderstanding me so completely?' She held herself in check; and said quite peaceably,

'No, I have never pressurized you for anything, not now, not in the future either'.

'Then what is the meaning of all that you are doing?'

'Nothing, it's very simple. A baby is taking shape inside me now. I want it alive'.

'If you want to become the mother of a child, don't you have to first get married?'

'What is the connection between that and this?'

'Does that mean - does that mean that you want to be an unwed mother?' — There was distress in his voice, a scream.

The man with whom ten years were spent; the man who was attractive precisely because he seemed so different from other common people. 'This man who had come along and spent life with me — beyond all defined boundaries, beyond all norms and conventions, beyond the prison-house of institutionalized relationships, - this man, who would have thought that his thinking could be so common-place?' Quite fed up with these arguments, she told him in a decisive tone, 'See I'm planning to become a mother. I am not asking you if I can become one. So don't give me any suggestions or advice. All I want to become is a mother. Don't apply any adjectives to it'.

'What does that mean? People ...what will people say?'

'People...?' For the first time she felt tremendously contemptuous towards him.

He too must have realized his mistake. If it was someone else, she might probably have asked plenty of other questions — where were these 'people' all these days? Where did these 'people' come now all of a sudden? — etc. But she was quiet. So all of a sudden he felt that he had fallen in stature in her eyes. He tried to offer an explanation: 'See it's not that I am afraid of people. But there must be a limit to everything — even to fearlessness. We are happy as we are. Why get into all these needless troubles, this headache?'

'I have told you already. You don't have to take up this headache. Whatever joy or sorrow will come, it will be entirely mine. You can be completely detached from it all.'

'But how can I remain detached living with you in the same house, working with you in the same office? How can I be indifferent? Am I not human?'

'Is that the problem? Then don't be with me here. You get a transfer back to Delhi. In any case you can be with your mother now that she is close to her death. You don't worry about me'.

'How easily you say this! Don't you feel anything for me? ... If that is so, alright. I think this madness of the child that has gripped you is a little too much. I don't really know what I should say about your decision to be a mother without being married. To me it appears to be the height of your obstinacy. If I really do go away, then don't blame me'.

'Certainly not' — she answered candidly. To tell the truth, she no longer had the patience to evaluate his behavior in terms of right and wrong. Some other thought had completely engulfed her mind. She was as if she was in a state of intoxication by that thought.

That's how he had left.

*

In the days after he had gone away, she really found his absence burdensome. When she sat for her meal, while going to the office, while going out for a stroll, and certainly while going to bed, she missed him tremendously. But as the days rolled on, she felt an unparalleled sensation forming itself within her, which made her forget all these trifles. A life which was all hers was taking shape inside her womb, a life whose tiny movements she could feel, what an astonishing feeling! All these years, she was all alone; yes, even when he was with her, she was all alone. But that's not so now. There was now another human life that was all hers in the true sense. When it is born tomorrow, it will be completely dependent on her. It will call her 'Amma', come running to her and encircle its arms around her neck. With an unblemished heart, and with no ulterior motives, in complete surrender it would love her... love her!!

In just imagining this love, her eyes welled up for the first time in many years.

Do all women feel this when they become mothers? Do they feel that the only true love is the love between a mother and a child; this alone is the only true relationship, all others are hollow, futile? 'How can the birth of this child which is giving me such immense contentment be wrong? How can it be unacceptable? How can it be a sin? That can never be possible. I must have this yet-to-be born child which is giving me for the first time in my life the experience of Satyam-Shivam-Sundaram. I cannot lose it come what may. The very idea of getting-having experiencing this child is itself so beautiful. I need nothing more than this from life'.

... Nothing? Not even him? He who had warmed her when it was cold, who had made it pleasant when it got hot and suffocating, who had held her hand to cross the crowded streets, who had slaked her thirst with the water of life, who had been her companion always by her side for ten years...?

He would write letters now and then; every alternate day he would call her without fail. 'It is very hard to be away from you. Mother is on her death-bed. She is pressurizing me to marry my uncle's daughter. There's no need to follow in the

tune of a girl whose caste is different, whose language is different, whose ways of life are different — she is saying. Forget about Mumbai — she is saying, but how to forget?' — etc.

*

When the baby was born, she was exhausted. Even then she managed to open her eyes and look at all that was hers. It was a very cute baby girl. Those baby eyes gave her a glimpse of the world in its entirety. This is what fulfillment in life means...

Some weeks later her phone rang out announcing his call. He spoke with great enthusiasm; there was good news for her. Finally mother has agreed to his marrying her. He cannot think of parting from her. 'Let's get married. That would also give the baby a name and status in society...'

...She cut his conversation short and said in words as sharp as a woodcutter's axe: 'Sorry, I don't need anyone now. I don't have any requirements. I have got all that I wanted. You can look out for your own future...'

Translated by
Nikhila H.

HAPPALADA SEETHAMMA

Savitha Nagabhushana

Savitha Nagabhushana is a unique and special voice among contemporary Kannada women writers today. Writing for over three decades, *Sthreeloka, Hoo Manassina Horatagara, Jathreyalli Shiva, Chandranannu Kareyiri Bhoomige, Hole Magalu, Naa Baruttene Kela* and *Darushana* are some of her works.

Radha: Madam... Madam...

I: Who is it?

Radha: Madam, could you please open the door for a moment?

I: Whom do you want?

Radha: I want to speak to you.

I: Me?

Radha: My name is Radha. I am a salesgirl. Please take a look at this.

I: No, thank you!

Radha: But, Madam, you are refusing even before you look at what I offer!

I: No, I am too busy.

Radha: Please don't say so, Madam. I have walked a long distance in this heat. Please take a look at least. It would be fine even if you don't purchase anything.

I: What is it?

Radha: Madam, could you please give me a glass of water?

I: Hmmm...

Radha: Please don't suspect me. You can close the door soon after, but please give me a little water to drink. I am not a cheat or thief.

I: How can we believe anybody in the current times? What did you say your name is?

Radha: Radha. I live on BB Street.

I: Where on the street?

Radha: Near Rajashekhar Tailors... Just next to it, in fact.

I: You mean near the house of Seethamma, who makes those papads?

Radha: How do you know? I am Seethamma's daughter...

I: Your sister...

Radha: I am Vinutha's younger sister...

I: I know Vinutha. She used to visit Rukku's house.

Radha: Vinutha got married last year. She is now in Sagara. It is two years since our father passed away...

I: Come in.

Radha: Thanks, Madam.

I: What is it that you sell?

Radha: Sanitary napkins, Madam.

I: Huh?

Radha: Please touch and see, Madam. The same packet will cost you two rupees more in a shop.

I: How much do you get if you sell a packet?

Radha: Rs. two as commission. I have a contract with Raju Medicals, to increase sales in the area in the next one month.

I: That means you have this work for one month. How much have you sold since morning?

Radha: Hardly anything, Madam! Barely four packets. Only the present day girls will purchase. Most women otherwise still use cloth. They will speak a lot but purchase just one packet.

I: Does your mother still make papads?

Radha: Without a doubt! My mother will certainly continue to make them till her last breath! I have been watching her since I was born. She is always either making the dough or preparing for the papads. If nothing else, she

will be rolling the papads, or counting them. She is so focused while making them; she turns furious if we intervene in any way. It is papads all the way, all the time.

I: But why? Didn't your father earn anything?

Radha: My father was an accountant at Habib's. We are three children, and his earnings were enough just to pay the house rent and for the milk everyday. The entire household depended on my mother's papads.

I: Your mother makes excellent papads... The rice papads, especially, are great.

Radha: Do you also purchase her papads?

I: Yes. At the Shobha Stores. They are called Bhavani Papads, right?

Radha: Yes, yes! They have been helping us a lot, they have even lent money to conduct my sister's marriage. They only told us to continue supplying the papads in exchange, nothing else! They also make sure they don't deny us any payment for the supply.

I: What are the ingredients you use to make the rice papads?

Radha: It is the old recipe, with a couple of varieties of rice, asafoetida, a little urad, dry red chilli and salt...

I: But I too tried the same ingredients, but my papads did not turn out as crisp. Now here as good as your mother's papads.

Radha: It is not just for you! My attempts to make like her too have failed! I have begged her a hundred times why it is so. She just smiles! If I pester her, she tells me it is merely a gift of God. Only she knows what it is, truly! There is still something about my mother's style. After kneading the dough, she makes it into a small mass, applies the necessary amount of oil and keeps it as an offering to God. And, no matter what, she never fails or forgets to do this. When I asked her the reason for this, she said that she

has used such a large quantity of rice flour and other ingredients. 'How can I afford to see it all go bad, when I have put in so much of money to get it?' she asked. And while preparing the dough too, she is like a smith, completed focused. Nothing can distract her. Really, I feel you can write a novel on the way my mother makes the papads. Unlike about us, who are no equals to her in making them. Only she can make such papads!

I: Don't you find it better than roaming on the streets hoping to sell things?

Radha: Oh! It is true that I will get earn my income sitting at home, but it has its own share of problems! She has been sitting in front of the furnace for long hours, and her skin too has become similar to a papad now! After kneading so much of dough, there are virtual pits in her palm, near her thumb, especially. She also can't sit straight like us. In fact, she has severe lower back pain.

I: Is that why you have preferred this work?

Radha: My friend has been selling shampoos. I joined this stream on her advice, but I feel this is not for me. Some people treat us very badly. In some houses, although there are women, the men prefer to speak to us and do so in a bad manner. If we tell them this is a product for women, they still ask us what it is, and pester us.

I: But does your mother...?

Radha: No, she does not like me sell things on the streets. 'What do you mean by selling sanitary napkins?' she asks in anger. She too has advised me to sit at home and make papads like a sober lady.

I: Don't you think she is right?

Radha: I have begun hating papads after looking at so many of them day and night. There is practically nothing else in our house. I have taken up this work just to get away from the smell.

I: What about other places? Have you tried nowhere else?

Radha: I have only a BA, that too in second class. People also ask money to provide us jobs. Where will I get money to give them?

I: Can you tell your mother that I want about 500 papads? I will give an advance if she wants. I need them by next Saturday, to send to my village.

Radha: She will give them tomorrow if you want! My brother will get them to your house.

I: That will be fine! Then I will give you a hundred rupees right now. Will you surely supply the papads?

Radha: Guarantee! What about these napkins?

I: No, thanks! After all, I stay at home. I use an old piece of cloth for as long as a year sometimes.

Radha: But, when you travel? It will prove convenient.

I: I know, but I travel barely twice or three times a year, that too just to my native village. I make sure I travel at the right time.

Radha: Fine, then! Shall I take your leave? Goodness, I lost track of the time speaking to you so much!

I: Just wait till I make you some coffee...

Radha: No, no. I am already late. I'll return some other day!

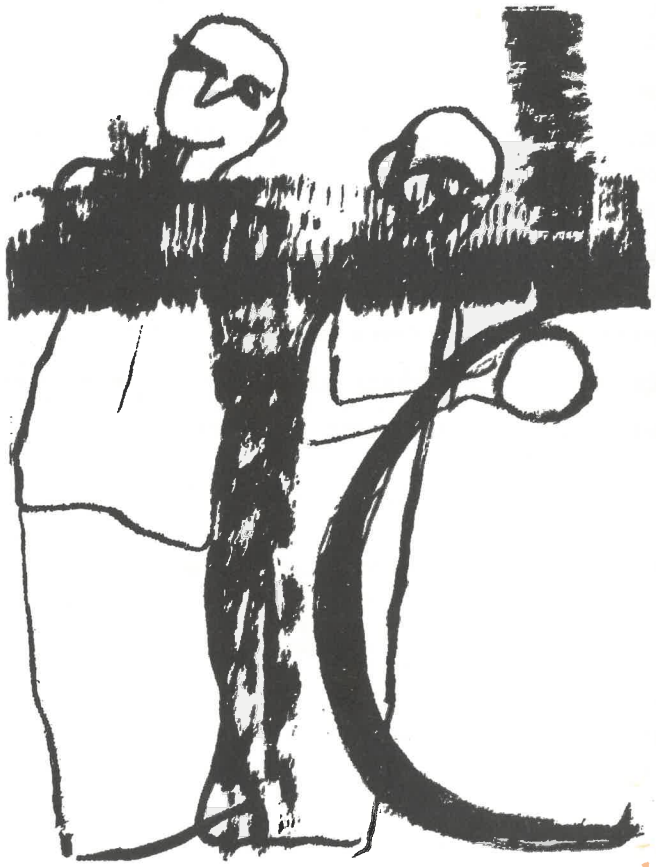
I: Wait, wait! It will take barely five minutes!

Translated by
Chitra Phalguni

DINING TABLE AND UPMA

Vasumati Udupa

Vasumati Udupa belongs to Kiranakare village of Shimoga district. She has written about 250 short stories and 15 novellas. Apart from this she has written poems for children, essays and even a play.



'I have this one wish... to keep a plate of upma on the dining table and eat it using a spoon.'

It will not be far-fetched to say that these words, uttered by her mother back when Vasudha was still a little girl in High School, have had a lasting impression on her. They ring in her ears from time to time- sometimes with reason and sometimes without one too. Some utterances are of such nature, no? If you analyse them closely, the circumstances and context under which they were said seem insignificant. Trifling too. And, whoever said it, also may not have meant anything serious. It could have just been simply said, like an in-the-moment feeling that is put into words. But then, why do such statements leave an imprint on the hearts of those listening to them? Moreover, why do they recur in their minds? What does one call this strange feature of the mind? Vasudha had no answers to these questions. That statement, which oozed of sorrow and aspiration simultaneously, probably gave birth to a stubborn feeling in her heart. Perhaps, a feeling of obduracy. Or, it probably instigated a desire for freedom. All of these are in the purview of the probable, of course. And, the 'probables' have a chance to be true too.

As a girl who was just turning eleven, Vasudha had begun to take a mad liking to her studies. She poured over her books as if the path to liberation was written in them somewhere. Later, during the time she was completing her engineering, she behaved as if she was on a penance. Of course, these are exaggerations.

After a particular age, children automatically become serious about their life. The boyishness is lost and they become goal oriented. The reality of the competitive world is such that it ripens even those that are unripe. Anyway, what

happened when, why and how are questions that are irrelevant now. Vasudha became an engineer. She got a job in a good company. Right at the start, she was going to earn a good salary. Her father was proud. Her mother was happy. Her brother was boastful. The little girl, sorry, the young woman, now had reached Bangalore and had found a flat for rent too. Her father asked someone he knew in the city to keep an eye on his daughter and felt as if he had fulfilled his share of responsibilities. Vasudha was already soaking in all the advice that rained on her, mostly from her father. When she was making a list of all the essential furniture she needs, without her notice, the first thing that made it to the list was a dining table. Do we need more evidence to say that the words of her mother had indeed left an impact on Vasudha's latent mind?

A fat glass was pasted on to the rotund dining table whose circumference met four chairs along the way. At the centre of the table, there was a vase containing artificial flowers that looked like they were real and had just blossomed. Worried that there might be a scratch on the glass surface, Vasudha lightly wiped and polished the glass and looked at her newest acquisition with pride. She then picked up the phone and called her mother.

'Amma, I've got all the essential furniture for the house. The dining table too has come...'

'Why was it urgent to buy the table, my dear?,' asked her mother.

'You come here. I'll tell you then,' replied Vasudha.

Has Amma forgotten what she had said once about the dining table? Or has she not? It wasn't like Vasudha had intended to remember what her mother had said. Not that she wanted to forget it either. As she was adding a dining table to her list, she remembered what her mother had said and it got her really excited. The feeling of unfathomable satisfaction, a kind of unexplainable awkwardness and the impression that she was crossing a *lakshman rekha* of sorts — Vasudha felt all of these at once. And, all of it because she bought a dining table!

It might have been a small desire but that didn't make an easy one to fulfill. Perhaps, Vasudha felt this way because of the atmosphere of fear, negation and anxiety that she grew up in. She would feel the need to do the thing that she was forbidden to do. Could it be that that stubborn feeling has safely lodged itself in her mind and recurs time and again? Could it be that all those desires that she thought she had forcibly suppressed and bottled up are now refusing to contain themselves and threatening to blast into visibility? If as a girl, this is natural for Vasudha to feel, then why is it that her father feels differently? Faith was his guiding force, his ultimate truth and life's motto. It was his *manodharma*. All Vasudha knew for sure was that the rules were all different for her, mainly because she was a girl.

*

'Which century are you stuck in? What was devised as a means to provide rest for women cannot still continue in that guise. Why are you still following it? If some of my friends come home, I feel like just dying and disappearing. You can do what you want. Don't force me...'

'If your father learns of this, he will peel your skin'

'Why would you tell him. Don't tell him, no?'

'It's not like that. We have a *saligrama* in the house. If something untoward happens because of this, then the house itself could be destroyed.'

'If that's true, why have we kept these gods in the house? Why are we worshipping them? We should just donate them to somebody.'

'Who will take the *saligrama*? It is something that been passed on by our ancestors. It is your father's inheritance. Have you ever seen him even drink a sip of water without praying to it first?

'Argh, thanks to Appa...'

Perhaps, even Amma has had the same thoughts as Vasudha at some point. But, after living with Appa for so many years, she has perhaps gotten used to it. She has learnt to be accommodative. Especially after having children, adjusting becomes part of one's behaviour and is not seen as something unnatural. On top of that, if one gives birth to a girl, then there is added fear or apprehension too- especially about the future. Yes, things have changed over the years. True. But will the changing trends of the present reach one in time or not is a matter of concern. Vasudha understands all of this only now. As she was growing up, she used to wonder, 'Why must one listen to this Amma and Appa! Why should one torture oneself and do what he tells her to do?' But despite how she felt, she did what she was asked to do. She may have fought with her mother about it but during those three days, she would confine herself to a corner of the house. She felt the need to protest but could not get herself to cross the line that was drawn around her. A prickly blanket, two empty sacks piled on top of each other serving as a pillow, one vessel of water on top of which was an upturned glass, surrounded her. There was no question of roaming around the house. Or, eat with everybody else. Amma used to serve food from a height and Vasudha used to eat. After eating, she would have to clean the place with cow dung. Oh, can these three days please end quickly! It was torturous. It was awkward.

With drops of sweat sticking to her body, she used to hate herself at that time. On the fourth day, when her mother used to give her water to dip her dirty clothes in and pour water over her head and body, Vasudha felt as if she had undergone a re-birth. What was the secret behind limiting her thoughts and protest to mere words and not action? Was she scared of Appa? Or the *saligrama*? Or, were there other reasons?

Sitting at the threshold of the house, Ajji used to be under the impression that she had the entire house under her purview. Having lost her husband at a young age, Ajji, gathering all her strength, did odd jobs in houses and

brought her son up. For Appa, Ajji was everything. The thought of Ajji would fill his eyes with tears and make his throat swell. It was Ajji that was really particular about following these rules around the house — *madi* they call them. She had an unreasonable belief in the *shastras* and the various customs. She would conduct the rituals of each and every festival with utmost devotion. She was particular about the different offerings that were to be made for each festival, the snacks and specialities that were to be eaten on those days, etc. She would fast on the day after the no moon day, *ekadashi*, do a detailed prayer on *dwadashi*, and thrice a week, she would fast for the god assigned to a particular day. Amma used to say that there was no limit to how much one could punish one's body.

'I must have done some kind of evil in some other birth for I'm suffering without a husband and doing odd jobs in this birth. I will pay the price for all of it in this birth itself,' was the kind of belief that ruled Ajji's actions. The mother's beliefs were successfully passed on to the son so much so that he believed that all that his mother said and did was always right. He might have been a professor in a college but in his house, his mother was the teacher.

As soon as he would wake up, he would do a puja — such a pious man that he would see God in almost anything. Kumkuma from the temple would always adorn his forehead. He did not differentiate between gods. He believed in all of them equally. His day comprised visits to the temple, readings from the puranas and the Vedas, discussions about leading a pious life etc. Teaching in a college was just a means to support his family but he believed that it was devotion and a lifestyle like his that would make his life more fulfilling. He was a worldly man but with no desire. He was never known as an exceptional teacher and he did not want to be known as that either.

'*Padmapatramivanchasi*' was the saying that guided his life. Until Ajji was alive, there was a charcoal fireplace. Gas and electricity did not conform to the customs she believed in. Rice used to cook on fire for hours together. Both mother

and son were experts at beating hunger. They could just survive on the *theertha* that is offered to the gods. They believed that this would help them get closer to the divine.

'They've killed and eaten me. For the sake of salvation, your grandmother died quickly. Or else, where would I be today?' When Amma used to say this, Vasudha would be all ears and would try and imagine what it was like when Ajji was alive.

With the advent of Shravana, it would be festivals galore. The house would host storytelling and married women were welcomed with kumkuma. Ajji would make sure nothing went wrong. Appa would make all the arrangements with devotion. When Ajji used to decorate the gods with jewellery while uttering a prayer, Appa bore a look of insatiable respect and satisfaction. Though he has been celebrating these festivals from the time he was born, he still was not bored of them. During Ganapati festival, right from setting up a good mantapa for Ganesha to all the decorations that needed to be put in place and to finally inviting Ganesha into the house, Appa would not tire of it at all. Even today, Appa follows the exact menu that Ajji practised during festivals. Chakkuli, Karigadubu and Modaka. In the evening, he would call his friends and offer these snacks to them too. Those who came home would praise the decorations and the arrangements. 'If guests were not there to see it, do you think Appa would still be as excited to decorate and arrange everything?' Vasudha was scolded for this outrageous question.

The budget for oil was more to keep the lamps burning than to buy food for the house. More money was spent on the flowers for decoration of gods than for vegetables. More than the books of the children, money was spent on agarbatti and other items that were used in a puja. If anyone spoke against Appa, they would get a thrashing. 'Who gave us everything?' 'Can't we give back something to the God that has given us everything and be thankful?' His arguments worked only for him and the likes of him. Why do I bother to stand up for what I believe? Why throw a tantrum against him? Age, said Amma. Sometimes, protesting for the sake of it is a quality

that belongs to a particular age. In some people, this quality is a little extreme. 'Even I used to be like this. Then, with time, I changed too. You know what's funny? I feel that because the mother and son were a certain way that I began to think differently. It is not that I did not have any faith in God. But what they insisted on doing felt like an imposition to me...,' Amma used to say.

This feeling of intolerance is a form of protest. Where there are rules and limits, there exists a desire to surpass them too, believed Vasudha.Yes, let those who believe in the *shastras* and customs fulfill them the way they want to. It should be according to one's belief. But Appa was not even willing to think about the logic behind those rituals and customs. Whether faith is steeped in a basis or does not have one, he wasn't interested to find out. Everything old is gold. If you question, he would be overcome with a mad anger. To get gas, electricity and a pressure cooker, Amma had to literally do a fast, it seems. That too, this was after Ajji died. Appa was always too strict about these rituals of purity. Yes, the *Saligrama* issue is one but Appa believed that impurity in the house would result in many unfortunate incidents. He would see a bad omen everywhere — a snake, red ants etc. Appa would have none of that.

One had to be conscious of even drinking water in front of him. One could not put one's lips to the glass and drink. The hand that touched the vessel that contained the rice was not supposed to touch other vessels. One had to wash one's hands before touching them. The fire that made rice was sacrosanct. Until that fireplace is washed, nothing else can be cooked there. Onions and garlic could never enter the house. Palak and drumstick and other such vegetables too were forbidden. Even if one desperately wants, apart from certain auspicious days, Uddin vada could not be prepared in the house. In fact, one cannot even utter its name- almost as if the sky would fall on one's head.

Appa has never been to a hotel in his life. In fact, he is proud of the fact that he was never compelled to go to one. He wanted his children to be this way too. Are our ancestors

stupid? They have made these rules for our good only, he used to say and would not entertain a debate on the topic. And those who wished to argue were non-believers according to him. The evil-doers. Those who did not have the good fortune of getting god's blessings. Both Appa and Amma seem to have spent most of their life in the god's room in the house. After taking a bath, Appa would sit in wet clothes and do the evening puja. Amma too would prepare the offerings to the god in clothes that were barely dry. She would also always wear a mark of some kind of fast or puja. Having sacrificed all that she had learnt, Amma would weirdly insist that we studied hard and concentrated on getting educated.

After being used to cleaning the eating area with cow dung, sitting on a dining table and eating with a spoon had become an impossible dream for her. Appa would sit on a wooden plank and Amma would serve the different food items one by one on a banana leaf. Nobody should talk during meals, believed Appa. Generally, these are things one forgets after the upanayana ceremony. But not Appa. What would such a man do when he sees a dining table? He would scold, or be bitterly quiet or would sit on his own on the floor. Or even worse, he would insist that we sprinkle cowdung water onto the dining table. If everyone sat together and ate, vessels could touch each other and food could become impure, no? On top of that, if Appa sees one eating with a spoon, he would boil with anger, no? He would be scandalised and would act as if Kalipurusha entered his house through the main door! Overall, it is a bad idea. How would Amma behave? Has she retained any amount of independence in her or has given it all up.

*

The smoking hot upma spread itself out on a beautiful glass plate. Even though she had restricted access to the kitchen in her house, Vasudha's upma was not anything less of a delicacy. But she wondered how it would be if she had added onions to the upma. She could try it some other time. She had never eaten onions her entire life and somehow she did not know if she would like the taste. But, these days, on cookery shows on television, almost nothing is made without onion, garlic paste, tomatoes etc. If she has to eat in the company canteen, she has to get used to all of this. But if her father hears of her thoughts right now, he would think of committing suicide. He was already in two minds when Vasudha was offered this job in Bangalore. He could not ask her not to go. This was a question of forgoing a good salary. But he could not give her permission to go either. She was going to be alone in a new city. Ultimately, he just gave in to the demands of the time and let her go.

This Saturday he was coming to Bangalore with Amma and Vasudha's brother. Sunday's tiffin was going to be upma.

When one eats with a spoon, one can barely fathom how hot the upma actually is. The first bite gave the tongue a rude shock. Uff, she blew into the spoon and ate slowly. The experience gave her immense happiness. What if Amma could also taste this happiness? Somewhere, she felt as if she had achieved a huge milestone and it gave her a lot of satisfaction.

Translated by
Archana Nathan

BANGLE

Sabeeha Bhoomigowda

Sabeeha Bhoomigowda is a professor and Head of the Department of Kannada in Mangalore University. Basically a poet, *Kadala Tadiya Mane* is her first collection of short stories, and *Mahila Atmakathe: Anusandhana, Mahila Sahitya Mattu Meemamse* are edited by her. She has a very committed social self.

Women kept trickling in one by one. Each one carried a packet in her hand — some small, some big. As they arrived and entered the inner room, the grief of the elderly Chowdamma and others who sat there reached the sky. Those who came in wiped their eyes and noses with the loose ends of their sarees; they took turmeric and vermilion from a packet and applied them on Chowdamma's forehead; they pulled out small glass bangles from another packet and forced them onto Chowdamma's hands. Right then, they fastened flowers to the already long string of flowers that was a burden on her bun. If some were contented to unfold and wrap a new saree they had brought with them over her shoulders like a shawl, others, being insistent, made the old woman get up and wear the saree they had brought. The practice, which had been taking place since the last six days with a few minor changes, baffled Vimala who came from an urban background. 'What kind of a custom is this? The woman is grieving at the death of her husband; how right is this custom which reminds her of her widowhood again and again? Shouldn't those who, during the time of mourning, force the woman to wear a new saree in the name of tradition have some sense? Everyone who comes applies vermilion to her forehead, puts flowers in her hair and makes her wear bangles. They are harassing her in the name of custom'. Vimala was engulfed with anger and outrage.

It did not take much time for the feelings of Vimala to transform into words. 'Why do you get angry, sister? It's the custom followed here. Why do you get worked up so much? How many more days can they do so, tell me? My dear, this is the way in which they express their love'.

Vimala turned to see who it was who said that. It was Chowdamma herself! Having listened to it, Vimala sat stupefied for a moment. She began to think whether the custom which appeared so cruel to her, could be viewed from such a perspective. It began to occur to her that, 'Indeed, people come one by one, make the widow weep, and they too shed tears with her, and create a vent for the sorrow within her'. Yet, her original opinion asking how a woman who was already in grief could be pestered in this manner did not disappear.

In the meantime, the voices of men could be heard gradually rising from the pyol outside. The women who were inside kept their mouths shut and perked up their ears. A conversation between Chowdamma and the sons of Hanumegowda was going on. The elders of the village, too, participated in it. How should the *Haalutuppa*[1] ceremony of the late Hanumegowda be performed on the tenth day? What preparations had to be made for it? What would the total expense amount to? What is the manner in which it can be shared? The talks which began with these and other matters got tangled due to the difference of opinions amongst them. When it fell on Chowdamma's ears, her sorrow relapsed.

'It's the same case in every house. Some are adamant that the ceremony must be conducted on a grand scale. In some families, there's wrangling over the manner in which the expenses has to be shared. In such times, I wonder how many would remember the sacrifice their parents made for them... I'm at a loss to understand why we insist that we want children. The happiness we get from them leaves much to be desired...'

Many who were around the elderly Nanjamma nodded in agreement quietly. Meanwhile, something flashed in Nagamma's mind and she said, '*Chigavva*[2], mother's glass bangles will be broken on the day of *Haalutuppa*. So, we

[1] a rite performed at the grave of the dead on the third day
[2] Mother's younger sister

should ask our elder brother to get a pair of thick bangles made for her to wear everyday'.

'Yes... you're right. I'd forgotten it. But they're all quarrelling with each other. If you broach the matter of the bangles with them now, you'll only end up adding fuel to fire. So, be quiet', cautioned Devamma.

'How can you say so, *Chigavva*? Can one see her with her bare hands? How much has she toiled for this house! The man who's regarded as our father just went on buying one agricultural field after another. He didn't ask mother or us what we wanted even once. You can take a look at mother's hands and neck. Can you see even a bit of gold over them? Today, he distributed the property he had made among his sons and entered the grave. Tell me, what has he provided to our mother? At least now, we should insist that she must be provided with thick bangles'.

Without even waiting for Devamma's reply, Nagamma went to her elder brothers.

'*Anna*[3], a pair of thick bangles have to be got made for mother to wear on the day of the ritual. I wanted to find out if you've made any arrangement for it...'

'What does thick bangle mean, Nagamma? Is it enough if it's made with silver?'

'No, *Anna*. Will you earn a good reputation if you get it done in silver? You must get a pair of bangles made from gold alone and make her wear it'.

2

'What kind of a life is it being born a woman! It's a wretched life', sighed Chennamma.

'Why, *Atthe*[4]? Why do you say so?' asked Saroja.

'It's nothing. I just remembered something. When the question of the bangles came up, don't know why, I remembered the past'.

[3] elder brother
[4] father's sister

'The matter of the bangles seems to have saddened you very much...'

'What shall I say, my dear. About thirty years have passed since all that took place. When I was newly married, I had such a deep desire to have the *Bilwara*[5] ornament that you can take it that I developed a stomach disorder. People of my parental home were quite well off. They had said that they would get it for the wedding, but didn't do so. Therefore, whenever I saw the bangle in someone's hands, I would touch it again and again; I would ask them how many sovereigns of gold they got it made from; I would calculate its price... It became an obsession with me. Those of my parental home washed their hands off saying, 'We've married you to one who has a good job. Let him get *Bilwara* made for you'. Whenever I asked my husband, he would say, 'Ask your parents to get it done for you. Already, I've a big responsibility to shoulder. I can't get it done'.

'Who then got made the ones you're wearing now on your hands?'

'Ultimately, my mother got it done for me. As the saying goes, one got invited for lunch after pleading very much for it. Such was my fate'.

'Why, *Atthe*? What happened?'

'One has a kind of sorrow till one get's them. After getting them indeed, one develops another kind of sorrow. All that I had imagined till then remained unfulfilled. Don't ask me about its shape, or anything else. They gave me some bangle as if fulfilling a *Harake*[6], and they earned the distinction of having gifted me bangles. That's all that happened, my dear'.

'Why, *Atthe*? Weren't you thrilled to see the bangles?'

'What was there for me to get thrilled? For that matter, I used to get a dream everyday till I got them. I wore a different kind of bangle each day in my dream and felt happy. When, indeed, I got the bangles, it snatched away my happiness from me.'

---

[5] a kind of gold bangle

[6] a vow which is fulfilled when one's prayers are answered

'How's that possible?'

'What else? If I thought that I could overlook what I had worn, and feel happy in my dream as earlier, should this *Bilwara* that I've worn now appear before me all the time? That's why it's said that if one gets a thing in the age when one can enjoy it — eat, wear and forget — the joy is altogether of a different sort. After one gets old...'

The eyes of Susheela who was listening to Chennamma became moist. She turned her face to a side as she did not want anyone to notice it. However, it did come to the attention of Saroja. It did not go unnoticed by Chennamma *Atthe* either.

'Oh dear! Why do you cry listening to my story? It's sheer madness. What's so big in it? Well, this is reality...'

'No, *Ajji*[7]. I was reminded of my mother after listening to you. She, too, ardently desired gold bangles like you. Once, when my father got made bangles for her, she felt she was over the moon; her ecstasy was so deeply etched in my eyes that the very same day I determined that when I grew up, I would get her another pair of bangles and see the joy in her eyes; the joy one gets seeing a peacock dance'.

'Did you get it made for her?'

'I was about to tell you... After I took up a job, I saved small amounts of money and bought a pair of bangles for her and took them with me. But, she regarded it as such a trivial matter that it dampened my spirits. My love, my concern, nothing moved her at all'.

'Why do you say so? How do you wish your mother should have reacted? Would a mother not feel elated? It's just that she might not have said it in as many words'

'No, *Ajji*... Don't play mischief. I feel so crestfallen if I think of it even now... I must have committed a mistake. I think I gave her the bangles at a wrong time. I had saved little by little from the meagre salary I earned, and, without giving my share of expenses to the house for two months, I purchased the bangles and took them to her. Do you know

---

[7] grandmother; here, a term of endearment for an elderly woman

what mother told me then? 'Couldn't you promptly give your share of expenses of the house instead of brining this one? Who had been crying for it?' — Could she speak like that?'

'It's not so, Sushi... She might have had greater need of your share of the salary than the bangles...'

'I, too, thought so earlier, *Ajji*. My elder sister wouldn't contribute anything from her salary to the house. Once, she brought home a mixer. Sometime later, she got a tape-recorder. Then, mother used to take pride in showing it to everyone who came home. But, in my case... Perhaps, by then, she had forgotten the craving she had for it at one time'.

'Gifting a thing is all that remains in our hands. My dear, it would be foolish on our part to be stubborn that others must give the same value that we expect of them'.

'It might be true, but I'm not sure of it, *Ajji*. Later, when I left home, and married against her wish, she tried to return the bangles I had got made for her'.

'Well... This isn't right... It would make anyone feel sad'.

'That's why I feel like crying even today... In her view, they were just bangles. For me, it wasn't so. It was a token of love. I can't return the blood that she has given me. Similarly, I assumed that the bangles had merged with her consciousness... Recalling all that...'

'Leave it, you crazy one. In the case of our fingers, are all of them of the same kind? As the proverb goes, the *Dose*[8] in every house if riddled with holes...' said Chennamma and concluded her talk.

Vimala began to feel embarrassed. 'Aren't these women conscious of the time and the context? Forgetting the reason for which they've gathered, each one unfolds one's stock of memories; they're chatting as if one ruminates after sharing betel leaves and areca nut!' She felt outraged, followed by helplessness. She was unable to figure out how she could console her *Atthe*; she too cried with her. She had been observing since the time she came for the rite. The ambience

[8] a pancake made of rice and dhal

in the house seemed like a collage to her. There was deep silence for a moment; the next moment the dead uncle was eulogised; another time there was weeping; there was nostalgia about incidents of the past! It was the same case with *Atthe*. For some time, she would cry and cry and suffer from headache; another moment, she would grasp her plight from a very realistic plane and react to it — it left Vimala dumbfounded.

Meanwhile, Dundamma, who was akin to Chowdamma's sister-in-law by relation, entered the inner room. Again, the entire room was transported from the present to recollection of memories of the past, and, as if it was dipped in a sea of sadness, began to ooze sorrow wherever it was touched.

'Hey... Mad woman! Why do you cry? How many more years do you wish to retain your husband? Didn't you serve him without any reluctance till he was alive? Then, why do you cry? Do you think you're going to stay here forever? Everyone should go one day or the other.' The voice which began with a reproachful tone gradually turned to sobbing when it ended. Won't rain follow thunder? The next moment, Chowdamma and Dundamma exchanged their roles.

Aunt Dundamma was very affectionate to all at home. Though she was quite a distant relative, and she lived in a place that was far away, she continued to have a major presence in the emotional world of all the members of the home. When Nagamma and her younger sister Jayamma were exchanging information about the happenings in the house, the question of the gold bangle cropped up again. Dundamma, too, turned emotional when she heard it.

'Chowdi, you never realised much as I advised you. You toiled for this house like a bonded labourer. You didn't get anything made for yourself. *Anna*, too, didn't pay due attention to you. The *kaasinasara* necklace, or the traditional *karimani* chain or the *Bilwara* was made for you; he left you like an unadorned piece of sculpture. He was wrong...'

'No, Dundi. He isn't at fault at all. Sometimes when he wanted to get them made for me; it was I who didn't show interest. Once, it was the fees of the son who was studying; then it was the hospital expenses of another son; by then it was the marriage of our eldest daughter; as soon as it finished Jayamma's wedding came up — we did have responsibilities one after the other. Would all these things happen if I got bangles for myself?'

'Do you mean to say that we should see your bare hands after the rites get over? Have you come to such a pitiable state?

'Nagamma, why do you bother so much? Will your elder brothers resort to such a thing? I'm not keen on having those made of gold. It would suffice if they're made of silver', said Chowdamma. Nagamma felt that it was futile trying to counsel her mother who spoke thus, and went away from there.

3

'Well, *Anna*. We're wracking our brains about meeting the expenses that have been incurred so far. Such being the case, how can we mobilise money for gold bangles? Besides, will mother wear gold bangles at this age?'

'Whose voice is this? It must be that of my second son Ramesh. Yes, there's no doubt about it', thought Chowdamma and waited for the next conversation.

'What did you say? Gold bangles? Should mother wear them now and parade herself? Who asked you to create this needless controversy? Will you bear the expenses for it? Or, will those who instigated you pay for it? They've nothing to lose. They say all that comes to their mind. They will suggest not only a pair of bangles, but much more'.

Before Nagamma could open her mouth, another salvo was fired. 'Don't I know why you sisters get bangles, chain and everything else made in the name of mother? It's because you'll get them after she is no more... This is your strategy. Otherwise, why are you so concerned now? You never had it so far'.

Nagamma got enraged listening to what the younger one of her elder brothers said. 'Let your mouth be infested with worms. How can you stoop so low? When I said what I felt in my heart regarding our mother who raised you, you said something that brings a lot of respect for both of us!'

Every sentence spoken fell on the ears of Chowdamma. She shut her ears. 'Nagamma, go in. Let there be no argument. A pair of bangles have to be got made. Isn't it all that's needed? Let's get them made. I've already made arrangements for it. You go. He's a crazy fellow,' said the eldest brother.

Chowdamma looked at her hands. Glass bangles of various colours were shining from the wrist to the elbow. Some of them were plain bangles, while others were dotted ones. She could not recollect having worn bangles in this manner any time in her life. She recalled how, in her childhood, she was stubborn in demanding spotted bangles, and on such occasions how the bangles she was made to wear refused to move either side. When she attempted to produce a tinkling sound, they piled up at the wrist and would stop tinkling. Moreover, mother used to preach that if she wore loose bangles, they would break soon. Hence, there was no chance for her to fulfill her wish to dance in consonance with the clinking of the bangles. But for sporting green-coloured bangles over the entire length of her hand soon after her wedding, it was only discoloured glass bangles that decorated her hand till today! Time passed by in removing the waste in the cowshed, cleaning cow's urine, preparing *rottis*[9] sitting in front of the firewood stove, making *Ragi Mudde*[10]s and catering to the stomach of all the people at home.

Today, again, small, medium and large bangles of various colours, shapes and designs are competing with each other to

---

[9] a kind of dish prepared by patting flour in a circular shape

[10] ragi balls

decorate my hand! Even among these, how many are of the kind I like, I wish to have? Do I have the liberty to choose only such ones? These are bangles which have come prepared to get broken two days later at the ritual!

'For that matter, do my long hands need gold bangles now? Do I have the disposition to wear them and strut around? Will those gold bangles equal the glass bangles that are thriving in my hands now?' lamented Chowdamma in this manner. A ray of optimism amidst disappointment all around warmed the cockles of her heart. That the bangles were going to be got made by the eldest son, and not as part of the expenses of the rite, brought her satisfaction. She heaved a sigh of relief that the possibility of wrangling over them after she passed away was precluded. This didn't happen the first time; perhaps, it wasn't it the last time too. She knew that her eldest son had the ability to discern her wish beforehand, and reciprocate accordingly. It was this faith that had bolstered her confidence.

'*Atthe*. He has brought the bangles that he got made for you. Try them once to see if they fit your hands properly'. Vimala said with hesitation, and waited to see the change it would bring in her *Atthe*. No, she did not have the capacity to read the expression on her *Atthe*'s face.

'Well... Make merry. Take these. Your daughters and daughter-in-law – all were adamant in getting them made for you', remarked the eldest son as he laughed.

'What do you mean? Can you make such a comment?' said Vimala, being furious.

'How'll you understand these things? You grew up in a city. Such things are common in villages. Do you think mother isn't happy in her heart because all of you got them made for her?'

'Sister-in-law, what *Anna* says is true? It's commendable that he alone got them made. Let mother wear gold bangles at least now'.

'But, Nagamma. What I'm trying to say is that it's right for her to wear the bangles. But, it's regrettable that she had to wait for such a day to wear bangles of this kind...'

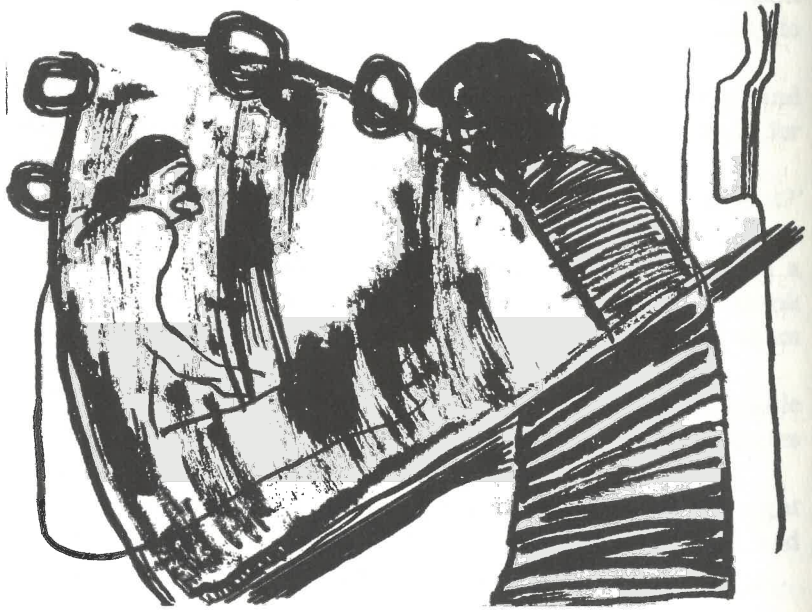
Outside, there was a light drizzle. Here, the same happened in the hearts of everybody...

Translated by
Rakshith M.R.

KALIDASA IN A TEMPO

Sunanda Kadame

Sunanda Kadame was born in Uttara Kannada's Alageri. She writes fiction and non-fiction and some of her collections are *Paduvanada Kadalu, Putta Padada Gurutu, Bari Eradu Rekke* and *Pisuguduva Bettasaalu.*



A blue-white painted tempo with 'Mahaganapathi' written on its back, was running from Ankola to the Mahabaleshwar temple in Gokarna. People in the overcrowded tempo looked like pickles stuffed in a jar. But the boy playing conductor, was tempted to get on board a couple more passengers and put them on the steps.

A hen, with all its leg tied, was hung in a nylon bag below the seat; with its rolling, curious eyes it seemed to be laughing, 'kukuku'. The fish dumped in a plastic bucket with its mouth tied in a green striped cloth, seem to be dancing, 'thik thak'. Not that these come all the way to Gokarna. They seem to be waiting to get down at either Hosur bridge or at Madanageri. The cosy atmosphere of the tempo is now filled with a variety of intimate perfumes.

The green hills along the Gangavali seem to split and made way for the tempo. The rising sun seems to be testing the patience of those in the tempo. Should scold that woman who is standing on my foot, should yell at that woman who yanked away the safety pin from my pallu in that rush of getting in, should push and pick up a fight with those who rubbed their body against mine, when the driver applied brakes.

The tyres are putting their seal on the withered road. While those seated are suffocated those standing are swinging like an uprooted plantain tree. No one has the time to look into the eyes of the other. The tempo seems unaware that it is transporting so many breathing people. The sky is now dark. The mountains on either side now seem like cute children ready to take a bath.

But two people are sitting there with two pairs of shining eyes. Amidst those standing in the tempo holding the top for support, they are fleetingly seen.

He is on the way to see his pregnant wife at his in-laws place. She is travelling to get native medicine for her son's

disease. But at that moment it seems the two are living in each other's stare. The air around is dancing.

The horns of the vehicles behind are also inaudible for the driver in the chaos of the tempo. The driver has suddenly switched on a tape recorder and lo! The great poet Kalidasa himself makes his appearance in the tempo.

'My eyes forever sing the love poem, you forever fill me with the desire for love.' The stars supposed to be in the night sky are now shining in the tempo itself.

'Eyes like lotus, curls like bees...' A hair that falls from her tresses is flying. The sky is now sitting with a calm moon in its lap after giving up a raging sun. Even the blazing horns of vehicles, just a foot away, don't pierce the ears.

'Her nose like the champak flower, her laughter like a flower in bloom, her gait like dance, she is the goddess of love on earth.' Oh! Gangavathi do flow in the right path, leaving behind all the pollutants in its place and flow in your pristine form. There are small hutments here. There are nature's sounds here. The young plant in the hutment has just flowered. Do bless all the sounds here.

'The thunder beats, the lightening chorus, rain drops like rose water'. The grass grown by the roadside is swinging in the air. It feels like the clouds have fallen, the waves of the sea splashing, rain drops on the metal chassis of the tempo fall 'pata pata pata'.

'With you by my side, the earth is heaven. To this love I surrender, I surrender...' It's a dreamlike scene. A whale is jumping out of the sea. The tempo jumps in an attempt to kiss the sky due to the potholes on this road.

'o..o..o..o... my beloved, won't you show mercy, won't you come to my side?' Who is the great man who composed this song? A melody that is pleasant to the ears and calm to the mind. There is no use praying to the Lord of Gokarna, Shiva. He who has worn Ganga in his head, his mind is now an untamed horse, there is no use now praying to him.

'Morning and evening, in dream and heart, I felt weary, perspired in the cold, I am in fear, in pain, who do I tell? What do I do?' Oh! Mahaganpathi the lifelong bachelor

protect all the living of this world. Make them reach their goals.

'You were etched into me soon as I saw you, you showered me with flowers of desire'. Now it is impossible. The wind has now diverted the rains. Raindrops through the open windows of the tempo now sits like pearls on her hair. They are like her black beads on his dark green shirt.

A wet bee is now kissing the chest of Dushyanta, sitting right opposite Shakuntale. The bee has now lost its way.

The direction of dream and mind, the direction of talk and silence, the direction of life and emotion, the direction of love and lust, the direction of happiness, the direction of the face... all of it have now dissolved into one. One who came to show direction has now misdirected. Now all directions are dissolved into him.

A drowsy cat of one house sits in the warm soot of the neighbouring house.

He also scolds his wife if she grins walking before a bar, she also scolds her husband if he wears a dress for more than two days. His wife also has toiled to clean the toilet and got a backache like her. He also is tensed like her husband the night when the child has fever.

The tempo is progressively turning empty as the houses are filling up. Who are the near and dear ones? Who are the ones who got down? Both of them are unclear. Those who met here today may never meet again tomorrow, like a bird with no footprints.

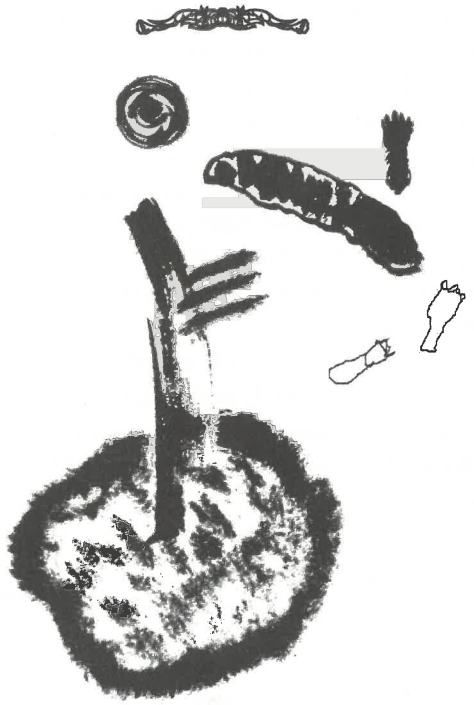
'Strumming the strings of my heart,I sing this song of separation. With who do I share the sorrow of my heart? O..o..o..o... beloved...' Let the tempo be on a journey like this. Let the Kaviratna Kalidasa cassette that is playing, keep playing.

Translated by
Aditya Bharadwaj

A NEW BIRTH

Nemichandra

Nemichandra began writing at an early age and has continued at a relentless pace. To date 20 of her books have been published, one of which is an extended translation from English, of the autobiography of Flavia, a survivor of domestic violence. Apart from short stories, which have on many occasions been born out of her own experiences, Nemichandra is also well known for her biographies. Her engineering background and later research experience seem to influence the topics and style of her literary work. She has often written on issues in science. Heroines in her fictions are many a time technically savvy professionals.



After many days I had been to Raji's house. It had been well over three years. I saw her last at her wedding. In the busy life of Bangalore, even occasional meetings are a tough proposition. We never stayed away from each other during our college days. I used to illustrate for the college paper and Raji would write stories. I went to her expecting the same closeness. But in these three years, a chasm had developed between her and me.

'Oh you've no idea Shashi, our Ravi started attempting to talk when he was barely six months old and started walking by eight months. It's just so scary! He is extremely intelligent and a fast learner. Look at him there, he is attempting to climb the window and stand...' Raji was narrating without a break. Even as I was lamenting why these girls get so excited the moment they become mothers, inspite of feeling bored, I feigned an interest in her son's capabilities and made appropriate 'Oh! Is that so...? Wow...!' sounds.

'He instantly understands whatever you say. Come here sweetheart! Say Namaste to aunty!' She forcibly picked the baby that was playing with some toys and nearly squeezed it to submission. The baby disinterestedly slipped away and went back to its toys and started beating a lid with a spoon.

'He should be in his mood... he has already learnt to say 'A... B... C... D...' it seemed that her commentary would not end. I interrupted.

'Anyway, did you write anything recently?'

'Oh! I am not even free for a minute! He has to grow up still...'

'You have your mother-in-law and sister-in-law. Isn't it?'

'I want to have him with me all the time Shashi. I don't feel like writing leaving him aside. I constantly worry that he may fall or hurt himself. Look at him laughing there! Naughty

fellow! When I see him like this, I feel that writing is so futile!' She picked up the kid and started planting wet kisses on him. I looked at her face beaming with contentment and happiness. Does motherhood make one forget the world? Why do these women cling to this motherhood so much? A man may not be so attached to his fatherhood. Why was it that I never had these intense desires! Even when I attempted to conceive, I did not do it as an ardent wish.

That evening when I returned home, my painting brush only drew small children on the canvas. My sister's child, my sister-in-law's, Raji's, Sheela's kid... Just born babies, pink hued — with their wet bodies, bald heads and narrow eyes!!

It's been more than six months since I took up the brush. No matter what I try, eventually I feel as if the canvas is filled with a child's face and I am overcome with a strange emptiness. I fished out the memories of each of the paintings one by one.

Three years ago...

Bangalore houses — crammed, one next to the other. The kids from my neighboring houses on either side would climb onto our window cells and jump down. When talking or scolding did not work, I had taken them to task. Since I was home all the time, it was becoming nearly impossible to have a moment of peace — I could neither sleep nor paint. They had their summer vacations. Can't they go to the streets or grounds to play? In this small house, there was no other room either. The neighboring lady picked up a fight instantly.

'If not the kids, do you expect grownups to create a din?'

'Look here. Ask your kids not to yell near the window. There hasn't been a moment's worth of peace — I am not able to sleep or work. Ask them to go to the street and play.'

'I won't let my kids play in the street. They are too young for that. Instead of looking at their playfulness and feeling happy...' the lady from the other side butted in.

To that, another lady from the neighborhood pitched in, 'Poor lady! She doesn't know how to enjoy the mayhem of kids...' her voice was laden with the pride of having borne

three kids. Some more vocal warfare and a tense ceasefire followed.

'Ah! She is childless... instead of lamenting her state and craving for children, should she be blasting the kids like this...?'

'That is why she has not conceived...' In these Bangalore housing blocks, one gets to hear every remark and fart uttered, irrespective of whether one is interested or not.

Today, I am living peacefully in a flat in Jayanagar. I am not bothered by overcrowded houses in my vicinity. The open sky gazes at me from my window. Nevertheless, those words keep echoing in my ears. When I am standing, sitting, staring at the horizon out of the window, counting stars in the night sky, while resting on his chest... 'She doesn't know how to enjoy the mayhem of kids...' Oh! The tone was filled with such pride! The pride of conception!

Well, in all fairness, it had been only four years since our marriage. I didn't want to have babies as yet. Ramesh's work kept him occupied nearly 14 hours every day. A series of my painting exhibitions, my spirited brush, solo shows, newspaper coverage, reviews, appreciations, critiques, in such a busy life, how could I feel the lack of a child? Even my aunt's daughter, who was younger to me, had started advising me after three years of my marriage.

'How long will you postpone owing to these damned paintings and exhibitions..?'

'I haven't felt the need for a child as yet. Right now, I have a pretty busy life. Don't worry. I'd have borne a child before I turn 30...' I laughed.

'Bear a child soon. It should not get delayed so much. Life is just barren without any children. There is no greater achievement than being a mother. It is best if you conceive within a couple of years of marriage.' I gaped in wonder as my young sister lectured me with a supreme bearing because she had already conceived a child.

Viji had given birth to Rashmi by nine and half months of her marriage. Viji, who went to her newlywed husband's house with great excitement, had lost her periods after

marriage. Before anyone could advise her to bear 'caution', Rashmi was born. Still in her early twenties, playful by nature, Viji was very restless during her pregnancy. 'Who wanted this nuisance so early? I did not even spend a year peacefully!' she went through her pregnancy lamenting. The new born baby with its tender body, hairy forehead and shoulders, slender hands, molting skin and the belly button tied up in a bandage, did not receive much affection from her. In two-three months when Rashmi became a well grown baby, Viji would naturally pick her up and kiss her. Nevertheless, the baby's incessant wetting, spitting out the milk even with a gentle touch on her tummy, constant feeding, cleaning and washing... life seemed like an imprisonment. 'Who would ever wish to bring this motherhood upon themselves?!' she had complained! Ever since the baby was weaned from breast-feeding, it was brought up at her grandmom's place. Viji had accidentally conceived, fed and cared for the baby out of compulsion and now with the passage of time, she had idealized everything and spoken with an air of achievement!

*

Well, for that matter, when did I ever desire a child?

When I went home this time, my sister had come for her third pregnancy. Mom had sharpened her laments against me, 'You are my eldest daughter. I wish to see you bear a child before I die...!' It was getting frustrating. Even my mother-in-law had taunted several times. Finally, that letter from his elder sister — 'Where is the meaning in life without children? Who are you earning for? Why don't you take Shashi to a doctor?! Who knows what's wrong?! Let me know what you think.'

It hit my heart — like a sharp thorn.

That night I told Ramesh — 'Let's have a child...'

'Let your Bombay exhibition get over· Shashi, we have even booked the art gallery...'

'I am not interested in any exhibition now...'

'What happened to you suddenly...?' he saw his sister's letter in my hand and laughed out loudly.

'Gosh! Do you want to prove that everything is fine with you?'

I was flustered at my immature behavior. I laughed it off. I don't want my child to come just because I want to shut the mouths of people around me. I should be ready to welcome it. So thinking, I turned my focus towards the exhibition. Six months after the exhibition, when nothing happened still, without panicking I went for a checkup.

After the tests, Ramesh was told by the doctor — 'You have no problem. However, I am sorry to say that, your wife's uterus is not fully developed and hence it's quite unlikely she'll be able to conceive.' I couldn't believe my ears.

Ramesh heard with a lot of patience, he swallowed his disappointment in a single go, like Lord Shiva had drunk the poison in a single gulp. He softly squeezed my shoulders and brought me out. What about me? There is a huge difference between willfully avoiding and being incapable, though the end result would be the same. I was so disappointed when I heard that I cannot bear a child. Determined to become a mother somehow, I went to every doctor, and tried homeopathy, allopathy, ayurveda, and even the roadside quack's medicines. It seemed as though I had lost my mind and it was running amok like a bull.

Every single remark of others started echoing in my mind, even those that I had ignored earlier! Even though I did not desire, their smug faces raft with the self-contented feeling of having borne a child, appeared in front of my eyes like still photographs on a wall.

Last summer when we had been to the house of Ramesh's elder sister, didn't her children pester him so much? 'Uncle buy us biscuits, buy us chocolates...' — there was no end to their demands. Finally that small car — the one that moves when the steering is rotated, the one that blinks its headlights when the batteries are inserted, costing 500 rupees — Raju was so stubborn about getting it. Ramesh's brother-in-law was embarrassed and objected — 'Ramesh!

Why did you have to spend so much?!' Immediately his sister had replied nonchalantly 'Let him buy. After all who else does he have to spend on?' It seemed as though she was doing a favor by allowing us to spend on her children. That expression on her face... contempt? Neglect? Which of these feelings is frozen in front of my eyes?

Another time, I had bought a 900 rupees Mysore georgette saree for my younger sister on the eve of Gauri Festival. I had anticipated that she would be excited and happy, but she did not even express her happiness. Mother said, 'Why did you have to buy her such an expensive saree now?' But my sister had replied — 'What would she lose mom? She earns thousands of rupees by selling a painting. Her husband is also earning handsomely. Both husband and wife lives a lavish life...' There was a hint of jealousy in her tone. Maybe a couple of paintings would sell for a thousand or more. To sell every painting for thousands, I am neither Picasso nor M.F. Hussain. What was the expression on my sister's face that day? Jealousy? Intolerance? Pride? Derision? What was that expression after all? There were more of portraits in my exhibition this time. An expectant mother, sermonizing Viji, my sister who had to stuff her ears even in the hot summer weather as she had recently given birth, an obese Ramesh's elder sister whose pretext was that she had given birth to two children... so many faces, not people, just faces. The expressions of their faces reflected my barren womb in multitude ways. How did this particular exhibition elicit more praise than expected? My paintings weren't just images; they were alive with the expressions borrowed from others. I realized for the first time, that in an artist's life no experience is a waste. Not even the bitter ones too... eventually!!

I continued to paint with a renewed vigor, forgetting my physical shortcomings. But people around me did not allow me to forget it so easily. My inability to conceive was the topic of discussion even during daily communication among others. I met my maternal cousin at Gopu's wedding.

'How are you?' I enquired.

'Yeah... surviving...' she remarked.

'Where are the kids?' I asked, noticing that she was alone.

'The eldest one had dysentery just day before yesterday. Hence I left her home. The younger one is still suffering from cold.'

'Well these are common issues when you have children. They will be well soon.' I remarked trying to console her.

'You are lucky. You have nothing else to worry about...' Even though she said that, her remark smacked of pride at having given birth to two children. It was pointedly mocking my barren womb. Or is this all my imagination?

'Then why did you have to bear, not one but two children?' I quipped. She was dumbfounded at my unexpected retort. She sniggered and left and soon gossip was rife amongst all my relatives.

*

At Shamlal's party also a similar incident happened. He introduced me to his wife — decked from top to bottom and scurrying around.

'This is Mrs. Shashi, an amazing painter...' I casually asked her in the midst of our conversation. 'What are your hobbies?'

'Ah nothing at all! Just eat-sleep...' her husband teased her. Though her face turned red with embarrass-ment, she tried to defend her now apparently empty life — 'I used to dance while in college — I was one of the most sought after dancers. After marriage and children, how would it be possible for me to do all that? Isn't it?' She brought out her glorious past to fill up the void in her present. 'Well I gave up dance, but I will make my daughter a great artist...' she pulled her five-year-old daughter and caressed her head.

'Supposing she also gives up dance after she bears a child...?' I had made a hasty retort. For a moment she was shocked, but immediately she said, 'Well you have no children. You are peacefully doing your painting and earning

laurels for your works.' I realized my mistake immediately. It seemed as though these children were the means for the parents to transfer their dreams onto the young shoulders and realize one's unfulfilled ambitions. I subdued these thoughts that seemed to overflow from within.

Finally, I was surprised when my best friend Sudha also faked an 'abortion' within a year of having conceived a child, just so that she could get a leave of 90 days to spend with her baby. Some doctor, who they knew, apparently agreed to give her a fake certificate and Sudha did that as she could not stay away from her child. Sudha was a very conscientious person as far as I knew. She was spiritually inclined and visited the ashram too.

'Sudha! Even you did something like this?' I asked her disappointedly.

'You'll know when you have a child...' she retorted.

I could not sleep that night.

Child... Child... Raji has stopped writing because of the child, Sudha lied because of the child, my husband's elder sister became obese because of the child, Vimala is on leave thrice a week and always rushes back home by 12 because she has a child... and finally everyone seems to think that the fact that I don't have a child is the reason for all my accomplishments too!

*

I wasn't myself off late. There was a certain restlessness seething inside me. I was sensing mockery in everything that people said. Even they did not seem to be sensitive towards me or my feelings. I was treated like a criminal for not having conceived even after marriage. They felt sorry for me as I was an incomplete woman! Even if I picked up a child and kissed it out of courtesy, they'd burn a broom to rid the child of 'evil eyes'! They'd press both their palms against the child's cheeks as a sign to ward off evil. What a strange world!! If the limbs are deformed, nobody hesitates to show it. It is not an

ill omen for any ritual. Nevertheless, my harmless womb is the reason for so many hurtful retorts.

*

Looking me still on bed even though it was past eight in the morning, Ramesh came near me. Softly touching my head, he enquired, 'Are you alright?'

'Yeah...' I replied casually.

'Don't you feel like getting up? You don't want to participate in the Delhi Art Festival?'

'I am just not feeling like it Ramesh...' I turned away from him.

'Shashi, I've been observing you. You are becoming very sensitive nowadays. It's as though you are waiting to pounce on anybody. No matter what anyone says, you personalise everything and suffer. What has happened to you?'

'I want a child.'

'You are being stubborn like a child now. You never felt such a longing before the doctor gave his report.'

'Why? Don't you have this desire?' I gave him a wicked glance.

'There is no point in tussling over a pointless matter. If getting a child is so important for you, let's adopt a child.' He sounded serious.

I was enraged. 'That's a lie! Every man would want a child that is his own. Ultimately he has to establish his manhood and feel contented.'

'Maybe, but don't group me with every other man. Have we ever really felt the lack of a child? Just because the doctor said that it is not possible for you to conceive, you seem determined to have a child now. Control your mind Shashi. Don't give undue importance to what others may say. Nearly 90 per cent of the women can bear a child, how many of them can give birth to these colorful paintings like you do?'

I slowly leaned against this shoulder, 'Tell me truly... don't you feel like you need to have a child of your own? A

progeny who will carry your family forward? I have disappointed you...'

'Stupid girl! Is ours the great Suryavamsha or Chandravamsha[1]?! There is no throne studded with precious stones waiting for its rightful heir! As far as I am concerned, even if you were to conceive, I will remain oblivious to the responsibility of bearing the child for nine months and experiencing the pain of delivery. By this measure, every man is a barren womb! You become a father only when the nurse brings a baby and hands it over to you saying 'Your child'. I don't find it any different from going to an orphanage and adopting a child as my own. Let go of your ridiculous thoughts. You have barely four more months for the Delhi Art Festival, start preparing for that. After that if you want, let's adopt a baby. Motherhood is not just about delivering a baby.'

I looked at him in disbelief. Not all men are like this. Maybe God gave me a spouse like Ramesh because my womb was empty. I don't have to feel ashamed of my weak mind; I have to win over it.

I turned resolute, disposed of all my inane thoughts and shed all my worries. When I was dressing up in front of the mirror, when I was dipping my brushes into the soft colorful feelings, when I would rest against his chest, I did not find any shortcomings in my womanhood. I cast aside my past that was burnt in self-pity and despair and started to look forward for tomorrow with excitement.

I met Aditi Gupta at the Delhi Art Festival. She was from Baroda. She casually enquired in the midst of our conversation, 'How many children do you have?' The same question again!!

'None' I replied. She possibly sensed the hesitation in my voice.

'Do you feel like having one?' she asked. I looked at her for a moment.

---

[1] Royal dynasties

'I had not felt so. I did want to have at least one child. I had heard so much from others about the process of giving birth... about creating! It had piqued my curiosity and I wanted to experience it...'

'Shall I tell you a truth Shashi...?' she laughed.

'What's that?'

'Painting or Writing or any creative task is nothing short of giving birth. For that matter, I did not feel any creative wonder during my pregnancy. I did not have to do anything apart from eating well! I agree that it is a great thing to bring up a child, but in our society there is a lot of importance being given to the act of bearing a child. Who really cares about how you bring it up?'

I listened to her silently. Aditi continued softly, 'Shashi, most women do not indulge in any creative pursuits. In the monotonous world of home-husband-chores, the children appear like wonderful creations! But for you and me, we don't need to have children for that reason! That apart, may I tell you another thing?' she asked.

'Please do.'

'If you really love children, would you differentiate between what's yours or mine? Do you need a greater mother than Mother Theresa?' Yeah. I was aware of that. But does the heart agree to the logical arguments of the mind? It turns away even the finer aspects of truth. The momentary emotional upheaval masks everything else. The intense desire for motherhood, the way Aditi described, was not felt in me. I don't even know if half of the women feel it either. Social pressures, mindless beliefs that a complete woman is one who has a child... so on and so forth. Viji had suffered so much when she missed her periods soon after marriage. She even tried to have it aborted. After she was advised against aborting the first child itself, she finally relented, and gave birth to the child. And after that, she started giving sermons to me too! Sheela from the neighborhood did not even think much about it. To her, conception was an inevitable outcome of marriage. She bore two one after the other, and then got operated, much to her

relief. My sister is continuing to bear children even after she has given birth to three already. Aren't all the three daughters? If motherhood was paramount, why this crazy desire to be a mother to a son only? It is extremely easy to sell ourselves to the compulsions of the society around us, and lead our life as per the expectations that others have set for us. But is it necessary?

Why am I even suffering? Isn't it because I feel this child will be the answer to my mother-in-law's taunts, to the sympathy of my friends, to the caustic remarks of my sister-in-law? Because this is the only way to establish my fertility and my husband's manhood? Probably, if we did not have these social compulsions, how many would really desire a child? If it is important to have a child, why not adopt one?

Whether I bear a child or not, my life is not empty. I have given birth to innumerable art pieces! I have shed colors all through my life and decorated these children in myriad hues. There is no boredom here, no mechanistic process. I don't have to look for the meaning of my life in my children. Am I really a barren woman? I can at least understand my physical womb being barren, but I fail to understand the intellectual barrenness of all of these people.

I returned from Delhi a new person. My constant interaction with artists during the 15 days opened a new colorful world in front of me. Looking at me bursting with enthusiasm, Ramesh asked in disbelief, 'You are so happy! What happened?' I did not reply. I simply laughed. The laughter was full of happiness and confidence.

*

It was Monday that day. Ramesh had left at 8 in the morning. I was lost in my painting. Viji arrived with Rashmi in tow and knocked on the door. Looking at me covered in paint – 'Oh, you are painting?' she enquired disinterestedly.

'Yeah, recently at an art festival...' I began happily. She let out a big yawn. I stopped and smiled within myself. Why

did I start sharing all this with her? Our fields are different now. Rashmi had placed her tiny palms on my wet painting. Fearing, I ran to her, 'Sweetheart, you shouldn't be touching that...' I picked her up and even as she began to wail, I took her to the kitchen and gave her some biscuits to calm her down. Viji ignored everything, having been used to the child's tantrums and mischiefs. She began talking about her mother-in-law and sister-in-law for some time.

'Why don't you check with a doctor?' she again started. I looked at Viji – already seven months pregnant with her second child. Her question did not make me uncomfortable like earlier. I started playing with the brush in my hand.

'I did Viji...'

'Oh! What did he say?' she seemed excited.

I replied calmly 'That there are very bleak chances of me bearing a child...'

'Which doctor said so? Aunt has shown your horoscope to 3-4 astrologers. Everyone has said that it's not one, you'll have two issues. I told you so many times to do a *Naga Pratishtha...*[2] '

I smiled gently.

'No Viji. Ramesh and I have decided to adopt a baby.'

'Will someone else's child become ours?'

'Is there any guarantee that our own children will be ours?' I posed another question in response. 'Viji, did you not see what happened to Raju uncle? Both of his sons fell wayward and squandered all his property on betting and horse racing. Don't you know that?'

'Not all children will end up like that!'

'Viji, I don't want to bring up a child as an investment for my future. Not even to make oblations and offerings after am dead and definitely not to forward the family tree. I will do it only to experience it, to experience the joys and travails of raising another life and giving it a form. I hope this experience will help me mature as an artist too... to feel the joy of showing this colorful world of mine to those

[2] A ritual that is expected to bring good to infertile women

young innocent eyes... and that too when I feel like doing so.' As I was talking, Rashmi strew the biscuit on the floor and went back to the painting and started smearing her hands with the colors. 'My dear... sweety...' I ran. For a moment though I was angry about Viji's negligence towards her child's behavior, I took it in stride. 'You shouldn't touch the colors like that darling. I'll give you a different paper. Come here.' I tried to coax her gently. Rashmi started wailing loudly.

Viji started to leave; 'Now she'll not shut up sister. I'll take leave. I came to invite you to my brother-in-law's child's naming ceremony.'

Viji heaved her seven-month pregnant body and pulled Rashmi alongside and walked down the street. I watched her till she turned around the corner. I came inside after quite some time and sat in front of the canvas. Rashmi had spoilt the lower part of the painting. I picked up the brush to set right the colors which her tiny palms had imprinted onto the painting but stopped myself...

Viji's seven month pregnant womb stood in front of my eyes. Willing or unwilling, the many copulations, the life that houses itself for 9 months, coming out with such immense pain – all of these are just bodily actions and reactions. I have toiled over such feelings in my mind, and have finally delivered it through these colours, this sweet-sour pain, one that brings together my external and internal worlds, is this experience any lesser?

Viji had asked me once – 'Don't you want to experience motherhood?'

'But have I opened myself to experience the many joys of life?'

'What about the feeling of a gentle warm body tumbling inside a seven-month womb...?'

'Is it possible to open up to all the experiences of life? No experience is inevitable. Viji had skipped PUC, got married, and comfortably spent years in the cycle of eating and sleeping. Can everyone experience all aspects of life?'

I shrugged off all thoughts instantly. I dipped the brush into the water and started covering the tiny palm prints of Rashmi with colors. On the canvas outside, in the cool evening, the red sun was happily setting.

Translated by
Praveen Shivashankar

THE MOUSTACHIOED WOMAN

Uma Rao

Uma Rao is a very unusual writer with a modern sensibility. She used to write a very popular column Mumbai Diary for *Lankesh Patrike*. *Agastya, Kadala Hadi, Rocky Parvatagala Naduve Cabaret, Avala Soorya, Bisilu Kolu* are some of her works.

The first sari I ever wore was my mother's. I was thirteen and it was a friend's engagement. The sari was a Mysore Silk, the colour of oil red, it had become mushy with excessive wear. It was dense with the fragrance of her favourite Afghan Snow. The second time I wore one, it was grandmother's. This time the colour of the silk was purple with a hard flaky border. That was for the *upanayana* of my brother. The third time it was my Akka's sari; for the fancy dress competition at school, a light blue Cashmere silk draped in the Coorgi way.

Never was I given a new sari. Every time there was an occasion in the family, I would beg, 'Amma, can I buy a new sari? 'Why waste money on a new sari with so many women around. Just drape one of ours,' mother would say.

On the only market street of our town was the glittering shop of Kantilal, the fatso: mirrors all around, lights shining from all corners and saris in heaps. As the salesman displayed sari after sari we would drape it on and see ourselves in the mirror from various angles. We would nudge the waists of our friends asking haughtily for their opinion. This colour is not pretty, this one is too thin, and this is out of fashion, in this the border is very narrow, this is not soft, so went our complaints about each sari shown to us. Then the boy at the shop would bring out more saris and wear them on himself by holding the pleats together and gyrate around us saying, 'Sister, look at this one, sister how showy this is, this is the latest design sister, you will like this sister,' entreating us to buy one. The mirrors around us would then reflect the image of this pretty damsel with a moustache setting in us a tingle of suppressed laughter. Those were the joys of another time.

But my fate was always tied to Amma's old saris, or saris my sister didn't like or the sari my aunt from Chikkajajur forgot to take with her the last time she was here. The first time I bought new saris for myself was when they fixed my wedding. I was already twenty eight. My husband was thirty seven. This was a second marriage for him. His first wife had died within a year of their wedding. He was a man with thick glasses, of very thin build and a balding head. He owned a stationery shop, was moneyed but did not have children. His parents had died long ago. He had no siblings. A second proposal for a marriage was not easy. We, on the other hand, were very ordinary folks; a house full of children. I was dark, short and plump. So, the match was perfect. We were married.

Even today, when the memories of the first night come back to me, I can smell the fresh fabric of the Molkalmur silk I was wearing that night, and the lingering scent of his supari.

No sooner had I entered my husband's house, toppling the rice-measure, I was inundated with saris. My husband would buy me saris for every festival and every occasion. That was the only trick up his sleeve to keep me happy. I wouldn't have asked for anything better. My wardrobe was filled with saris... reds, pinks, purples, leaf-green, vermilion, whites, blues, Kanchi, Dharmavaram, Ilkal, Kollegal, Narayanapeta. Saris of all conceivable kinds. For the *haldi kumkum* occasions in the neighbourhood, our ladies club events, bhajans at the Ram Mandir, baby shower next door, wedding at our neighbours living across the street. Saris bought at discounted prices in sales organised during the off seasons in wedding halls, sari to go watch a new movie of Rajkumar, and the three rings circus. But I don't remember my husband noticing the saris I wore or appreciating them, ever.

The days passed without me being aware of it. His days were filled with the daily accounts at the shop, loan recoveries, rental surplus and stock checking. From being his life partner I ended up being a night partner. He would leave home at the break of dawn to return only at nightfall, fill his

hungry belly and go to sleep. Those occasional moments of hurried intimacies between us did not result in blossom. My womb didn't grow. The house never witnessed the flush of children's laughter. The days trickled by and I had no reckoning of it at all.

One by one, my father, mother and grandmother all passed away. My sister killed herself. I was left alone in a childless house. There was a feeling of a haunting silence both at home and in my heart. On evenings that I sat alone by the veranda of the house and gazed emptily at the sky, I would be overwhelmed by the memory of my mother's maroon Mysore Silk Sari and the dense fragrance of Afghan Snow hidden in its folds, making the cords in my throat stiffen.

On one such evening, my husband who was busy checking his accounts as usual, breathed his last on the very chair he was sitting.

*

I sold our small house and made a deposit here to join this old age home. I sold all our belongings before coming here. I brought along with me only my cabinet of saris. Somehow, I couldn't bring myself to part with it. Here, I am comfortable. But I have grown weak over the years. My lunch and breakfast are served in my room. So I don't go out anywhere. Nor does anyone visit me. Where would I go wearing my saris?

I leave my flat only once during the day. In the mornings, I clean the house and go out to throw the garbage. I stride all the way to the end of the old age home where they collect all the garbage. I wear a different sari every day. I walk as slowly as possible. After I come back, I recline on the chair with a heave just before changing my sari, when my memories take a procession. The day this sari was bought, the occasion, my mood all come back to me. The image of the moustachioed boy draping a sari on himself pleading with me saying 'Sister, see this sari, sister' comes back with the realisation of

everything in the present, my mouldy solitary cell of a room, the ache in my knees, my left eye which twitches incessantly, the nightmares I get every night, the unending haunt of the supari scent of my husband, the desperation in my father's eyes when he agreed to marry me off to a man to whom I would be a second wife, the blue fingers of the noose visible on my sister's neck when I put the last morsel of rice in her mouth before they took her body away, the picture of the Murphy baby smiling at me from inside a calendar snap never to accede to my yearnings to fill my womb, all fade away easing the knots in the depths of my stomach.

Translated by
Ashwin Kumar A.P.

MOTHERHOOD

H. Nagaveni

Dr. H. Nagaveni is a well-known Kannada fiction writer. Her works are *Naakaneneeru, Meeyuva Aata, Vasundhareya Gyaana, Sooryanige Ondu Veelya,* and a novel *Gandhi Banda.* She writes with her intimate awareness of the Tulunaad culture, especially about the atrocities on the oppressed in the district. She hails from a small village called Honnakatte in Dakshina Kannada district and is presently working as the Chief Librarian at the Kannada University at Hampi.

MOTHERHOOD

Almost a couple of hours had elapsed since the time fixed for Moidin Byari's ultimate journey to eternity, and the cortege had still not left his house. But the village folk were swarming all over the place, on the streets, the by-lanes, the more fortunate ones taking shelter under trees, and each moment of their wait seemed like ages. However, no dearth of enthusiasm was seen amongst the people, though they had been waiting since the dawn of the day without food and water, to pay their last respects to the departed soul.

Not far off from the vicinity in Thukra Moily's hut, it was a different scenario with a pregnant Sundari lying alone at home. Not in the best of health, she lay low, wrapped in her sheets. It was then that she suddenly felt the mild spasms of labour pain and with it the damp feeling in her under garments and a terrible fear gripped her. Had the baby's water bag ruptured? This unexpected eruption of the labour pain, that too when there were no one around in the house... like the sudden plunge of a tiny cobra on her forehead made her virtually dead with fear!!

Each spasm of pain increased in intensity as it reoccurred, leaving an inexperienced Sundari in a stage of her first pregnancy totally vulnerable to suffering, and bizarre thoughts started running through her mind.

Each time the pain appeared with renewed aggression, like the character of monster Mahishaasura, barging onto the stage with his typical portrayal of war dance, Sundari writhed in pain, biting her lips and letting out a moan, until the spasm died for a while. *'Ooh Mother... this is unbearable... none on this earth... even the bitterest of my enemies deserve to undergo this pain'* ...Sundari felt. And as if to take pity on the girl, and granting her rest for a while, each spasm of pain had its momentary breaks making her uttera sigh of relief

saying... *'Lord I am saved'* But as the adage goes, it is said labour pain is like lovers quarrels, like the sweet innocence of a child's anger and little is known as to when it would appear orrecede.

Being in the state of her maiden pregnancy, Sundari had so far only heard about the plight of labour pain from others. Now going through the horrifying experience, all her screams would have no mercy on the pain which reappeared each time with renewed aggression as if to say, the tiny one in the mother's womb is in no hurry to see the outer world... or it enjoys the right of privilege of giving pain to the mother. Whatever the intensity, this unbearable pain failed to mark its origin... whether it erupted from the groin, the navel or the back, it rose and ascended like the waves on a rough sea, hitting the shores with aggression, as if to succeed in its effort to push the tiny one out of the mother's womb onto its new world.

It was a Sundari suffering alone in a helpless and miserable condition and her moans were heard only by Gumma the dog. He had sat up and peeked into the hut several times, minutely observing her plight. Sundari felt her life being squeezed out of her and her moans turned into shrieks as if to pierce the thatched roof of her hut. Seeing his mistress in such a hapless state, Gumma came out into the open, looked up to the sky and started howling, as if to desperately summon, whoever present there to his mistress's help. Ironically, those who were supposed to perceive the message behind Gumma's meaningful howls, were all absorbed in Moidin Byari's funeral and failed to understand the logic behind Gumma's howling. Sundari's mother Maire Moildi too was sitting under a jackfruit tree by the road, waiting for the cortege to appear and amidst the din that existed, she could hardly hear Gumma howling.

The grief-stricken villagers assembled there seemed emotionally shattered by this sudden death and off and on the subject of discussions also shifted to the issue of strained relationship that the village folk had developed with the Moidin Byari family in the recent days.

From good old times the people of this village had been living in peace and harmony, and there existed quite an intimate bondage between the local folk and Moidin Byari's family too. However, in the recent past, certain undesirable elements had shown the seed of communal hatred, shattering the very peace-loving fabric of the village.

Madarakeri had about fifty houses. There were only four Muslim families, three Brahmin families and the rest of the people were all non-Brahmins. As is the case with most villages, and as if to deprive people of their hard-earned money, this place too had the temple of Lord Ganesha, a couple of liquor shops, toddy shops, and provision shops and a few petty shops. But basic facilities like schools and hospitals were available only in the neighboring Kadebettu.

The story goes that a sudden turn of events leading to all the ugly incidents happened when Moidin Byari along with his people had gone to the Mosque at Kadebettu. Some of the Hindu locals of Kadebettu had planned to build a Subramanya temple right beside this mosque and though the elders in the mosque had maintained a composed silence, a bunch of immature Muslim youth had let out a discordant note, uprooting the peace and tranquility of an otherwise peaceful place.

Things happened suddenly and the turn of ugly events that followed did not take much time to spread. A war cry went out from one camp, and one from the other... enough to burn minds and houses!! Kadebettu burnt like hell and soon became a deadly cremation ground. Several lives were lost and amidst all the destruction around, a new temple began to rise!!

'Love and hate are like the soothing rays of rising sun and the scorching heat of the setting sun and the flames of hatred does not take long to travel'... So said the elders and the learned and as if in consent to this saying the flames of ill-will didn't take long to travel from Kadebettu to Maadarakeri and on to the courtyard of Moidin Byari.

Rumour had widely spread in every nook and corner of Madarakeri that Moidin Byari had not favoured the

construction of a temple in Kadebettu. This was like planting the weapon of hatred into the petty minds of the ignorant and the gullible. As the saying goes... *'It is easier to douse the flames of a forest fire than douse the flames of hatred of a frenzied mind.'* Enough venom had already been spilled, and as if a sharpened weapon had been planted into the hands of a lunatic, things went out of control resulting in shattering the peace and tranquility that had existed in this village all these years and within a week of these incidents Moidin Byari died, leaving the people of Maadarakeri grief-stricken. The hands that held the weapons abruptly dropped them and started wiping the tears.

In the usual course, had things been normal, as soon as they had heard the news of somebody's death, the Shudras of Maadarakeri would have rushed to the house of the bereaved to offer their condolences. They would have carried 'saambraani' and incense sticks to pay their respects to the departed soul. But today none had the moral courage to show their faces at Moidin Byari's house. The womenfolk of Maadarakeri spat on their men, saying, *'You worthless people, listened to some crazy and disgruntled fools. You sold trust that was worth pearls for the price of salt and did such despicable things!'*

But today, with the guilt of their dastardly acts heavily on their hearts, and the bitter truth of reality burning their conscience, the village folk gathered on either side of the streets as if to make penance and free their minds at least by witnessing the fakir's funeral.

Amidst all the mixed emotions and the varied thoughts that turned into words among the village folks gathered there, Gumma the faithful dog would not give up his task. When none seemed to heed to his howling, he darted across the street and barked furiously as if to show loyalty to his mistress, who had lovingly fed him all these days. Though Gumma reached Maire moildi, his initial efforts failed to draw her attention.

With Gamma's continuous howling, a furious Marie Moildi cursed him shouting *'Let the vulture take him away'*

and threw a stone at him, but Gumma's barking wouldn't stop! It was only becoming more and more meaningful. Finally, as she stood up shouting and decided to kick him away, a sudden realization dawned on her... the realization that Gumma's howling sounded different today!!A chilling fear flashed through her mind and without wasting more time she was running towards her hut. The sight inside the hut shocked her. Sundari was writhing in pain and screaming with sweat dripping down her forehead. Tukra Bhandari's daughter Seethu who lived next door too had followed Moildi into her hut. Without a second thought, Seethu started towards Moidin Byari's house to fetch his wife Aisam Byardi, the only person capable of saving this girl in distress.

Hardly had she taken a few steps when the shocking realization dawned on her that Moiddin Byari had died that very morning!! The bitter truth was that just a couple of days ago, her own people were out sowing the seeds of hatred and attacking the houses of the other community... least to say it was Moidin Byari's community and Seethu loathed her own self and despised the thought that she had to go to Moidin Byari's house seeking help, when her own people had spread the rage of hatred to attack his community and the realization brought tears in her eyes.

Sowing the seeds of religious bigotry in the area, some elements had propagated the view that obtaining help from Byari family was like playing with a venomous snake. Seethu felt atrocious that a family that had come to their rescue in each of the crisis and were ready to lay down their lives, had been antagonized to this extent. She shared these feelings with Maire Moildi.

In the whole of Maadarakeri, there was only one able midwife and that was Aisam Byardi. Even in her old age, she worked without a moment of rest. It was the countless number of lives she had saved, showing them the path to the outer world, bringing them out so as to show them the light of the world. She had the ability to see even the most difficult of deliveries through, without the slightest problem. When the very same Maire Moildi was in her first pregnancy, and

when she was almost on the jaws of death ...*who was it who had saved her and brought little Sundari into this world? The same Aisam Byardi, the benevolent mother!!*

Whatever might be the religious beliefs and obligations Aisam Byardi had lived with, she had made sure that they do not come in the way of her humaneness, her life's mission of saving human lives! In this particular aspect, she had the strong support of her husband too. There would often be disagreeing grunts and objections from their grown-up children, but Moiddin Byari used to brush them aside, citing the importance of humaneness over bigotism. Aisam Byardi, who would come to people's help even in the dead of the night, had become the very soul of Maadarakeri. It was only when people heard about Moiddin Byari's death, they realized that when the sensitive issue of religion raises its ugly head, the mind loses its balance, and humaneness and gratitude take a back seat. That realization, and the regret that accompanied it, had unfortunately come too late!

Maire Moildi could think of nothing she could do to help reduce her daughter's sufferings. Feeling crippled and helpless she sank to the floor. Not being able to see Maire Moildi's plight and her daughter's suffering, Seethu rushed out into the lane and announced the dangerous situation in Maire Moildi's hut to everyone. The men and women, who were waiting to catch a glimpse of Moiddin Byari's coffin, rushed to Sundari's help... The concerned womenfolk started praying to their family Gods and the village Gods, saying, *'Let this delivery be as easy as picking up a flower; let the umbilical cord roll down as easily as the bunch of flowers'* After all, each one of them had themselves experienced what the poor girl was going through now !! The females sat around the pregnant girl and continued their prayers, but there seemed no sign of any progress. Sundari's screams seemed to almost touch the skies now!

One of the women, ran into her hut, made a potion of cumin seeds and herbs, and brought it to Sundari, hoping it would help reduce her pain. Seethu brought a little warm castor oil and started applying it to the navel and lower

stomach of the mother-to-be, uttering a few comforting words.

In spite of the efforts of people gathered there, the process of birthing failed to happen. The only person each one of them could think of at this crucial moment was Aisam Byardi. Even the men folk recollected the savior in Aisam Byardi, during the times their wives gave birth to their children. However time moved on and with it Sundari's agony continued.

Sundari's woes continued and with it her mother's wails too. Gripped by the fear that her only support and companion in life might die, Sundari's mother was inconsolable. It was only the day of the previous Sankranti festival that Maire's husband Vasu Moily and son-in-law Chaniya had been washed away in the river, when their boats capsized. Now her only support in life was her daughter, earning their livelihood by working in the paddy fields and rolling 'beedies'.

Who could bear to watch Maire Moildi's fear and anxiety? Who could anticipate the things that can happen now? Seetu's father, Tukra Bhandari, could not bear it anymore. *'Let whatever destined to happen may happen... I will go and inform Aisam Bardi about the situation... I should move now.'* With these thoughts in mind, he started walking towards Moiddin Byari's house. He continued to think: *'We might have set fire to a hill, but will it stop grass from sprouting on it?'* Walking as fast as he could, he reached the street on which the Byaris lived. In the meanwhile, Byari's funeral procession had just left the street.

Tukra Bhandari saw the tail of Moiddin Byari's funeral procession. Thinking it was Moiddin Byari in flesh and blood; he closed his eyes and prayed for the departed soul. As he reached Byari's courtyard, he felt mortally scared, but asserting the courage he had mustered, he started climbing the steps that led to Byari's house.

Grief had overpowered that house of death!! Tukra Bhandari felt as if he had entered a cave of silence! He hesitated a little. His heart grew heavy with feelings and memories that were unexplainable. Innumerable instances

where Byari had bailed him out of trouble came back to him one after another in quick succession. Tukra Bhandari started weeping!!

A pall of gloom had descended on Moiddin Byari's house and with everyone mourning; none were there to observe Tukra Bhandari... neither his presence nor his weeping. A few women were cooking food for the men folk who would soon be returning after performing the last rites of Moidin Byari. Byari's sisters and daughters-in-law had given Aisam Bardi the ritual bath and clad in her mourning white robe she was put in one of the inner rooms. It was unbearable to watch the sufferings of this grief stricken woman who was shattered by the sudden demise of her life partner, and her daughters amidst their grief made efforts to console her.

Aisam Byardi recalled that scene once more. Her heart overflowed with grief and she started sobbing again. Before her husband's body was placed in the coffin, she had seen his face for the last time. Now, memories of her life with him for sixty-two long years were flooding her mind... She was no longer interested in living!!

As Tukra Bhandari stood in the courtyard shedding tears, the women inside the house were getting ready for the *Iddat* ritual. As dictated by custom, a woman who has just been widowed had to spend four months and ten days confined to a dark room. During this period, she had to do *namaaz* and recite from the Holy Koran, praying for the peace of the departed soul. During *Iddat,* only her close relatives could see her so as to share her grief. But Aisam Byardi's loyalty to rituals was such that she would be prepared to observe *Iddat,* for not only months but for years for the peace of her husband's soul.

The news brought by Tukra Bhandari only doubled her sorrows. *'Should this task have to come at this hour ...when I am in the midst of this ritual"* she lamented. However, even in this hour of grief she realized that her sitting here and mourning would not help an expectant mother and her child-to be. As humanness and compassion were the virtues she had always strived to attain, the truth of life and death began

to dawn on her, making her duty to the pregnant woman a priority. So she took the decision of going to the rescue of the two lives in danger and confided her decision to her dear ones.

It is no doubt that customs and discipline are important in one's life. But to sit and mourn idly and stick to the traditions when two lives are dependent on you would be the cruel act of a sick mind... she thought. With these thoughts Aisam Byardi's mind was made up.

As most of the women folk present with her had experienced the hardships of birthing and there were only positive reactions to Aisam Byardi's decision, though some of them hoped that the delivery of the child would be done before the men returned from the funeral and prayers at the Mosque. A determined Aisam Byardi took off her white robe and wearing her usual black burka, stepped out of her house with Bhandari and it seemed she had left behind all her grief in the *'Iddat room'*!! As she hurried on to the streets, dusk seemed to be approaching.

Tukra Bhandari walked with her in utter silence. This woman's brave decision had stunned him speechless and her felt he was escorting the Goddess herself to the house of Sundari.

As soon as the people gathered at Maire Moildi's hut caught a glimpse of Aisam Byardi all their anxiety vanished into thin air. The woman who had always come to their rescue had done it again. She had come to their rescue and this crucial hour, suppressing all her grief and sorrow within her. Like the Goddess who would come rescue... she was here and they saw their own Goddess Jumadi in her. She had come to the rescue of the very people who had only recently planned to wipe out her entire family!! With guilt hanging heavily in their minds, they received this old lady, hanging down their heads in shame.

Aisam Byardi always said and believed that... *'There is no easy death for the one who really makes Life worth Living'* as if her husband's death had never happened at all, she got into her sacred duty of ushering a new life into this world.

True to the belief that there is no failure for Aisam Byardi, the job was completed within minutes and the baby saw the world. It was screaming as if to tell her *'You who have made it possible for me to see my mother's face... why were you late and had me locked in the dark world for so long?'* Aisam Byardi kissed the lovely lump of flesh and started walking back home.

As Tukra Bhandari started back meekly following Aisam Byardi to her place in continued silence, he felt the weight of gratitude hanging heavily on his shoulders and smother in gall utterance of words. Today, he realized that the fort that houses the insanity of hatred had miserably collapsed. He realized the utter truth behind the adage — *'The path traversed by the goat belongs to the goat. It does not belong to the elephant '...What would have been our plight if Aisam Byardi had chosen to tread the very path of revenge we people had taken. In contrast the noble woman had shown the real path of humanity...* he lamented. His heart was full of regret. He was not alone. The whole of Maadarakeri shared his feelings true... ironically the very beings who had a few days back burnt down the 'pandal' erected in front of Moidin Byari's house!!

Accompanied by Bhandari, Aisam Byardi entered her courtyard. As usual she went to the makeshift shelf under the roofing and took out a dried palm leaf. She pressed it to her bosom and uttered a silent prayer. Handing the palm leaf to Bhandari she said, *'This is for the new-born'* and walked straight towards her bathroom. The women-folk who were all there, watched her in stunned silence.

By the time the men-folk returned after the funeral rites, Aisam Byardi had finished her bath and had entered the dark room to start her *'Iddat'* again. The words her husband would always tell her started ringing in her ears and took her down memory lane...

'Life is Great... Living is still Greater... Customs and religious practices can never match the Greatness of Living'

'I hope I have done something which his soul would approve of...' she said to herself and heaved a deep sigh of relief.

Translated by
M. Pradeep Kumar

RAIN OF FIRE

Bhanu Mushtaq

Bhanu Mushtaq is a reputed Kannada writer and a social activist. She has won numerous awards for her literary works and social activism. She lives in Hassan where she works as an advocate. She is the author of many short-story collections, novels and poetry anthologies. The Kannada film *Haseena*, based on a story of a Muslim woman written by her and directed by reputed film director Girish Kasaravalli, won the national award.

RAIN OF FIRE

Hearing the morning Azaan from the mosque, Mutavalli[1] Usman Saheb got off the bed. Noticing that his wife Arifa was not in the bed, he stepped into the hall where Arifa and son Ansar slept haphazardly on a mat, lost in sound sleep. The water jug, milk vessel, flask, glass were in disarray, and the wet cloth placed on the forehead of three-year old Ansar implied that his respiration system was not healthy. Usman Saheb grew uncomfortable seeing Arifa's sleeping posture in the open hall. She had stayed awake the whole night. Soon he was reminded of his youngest sister Jamila and her husband who were sleeping in the room adjacent to hall. He thought of covering a *chadar* over Arifa, but the very thought of Jamil's husband made him indignant. He shook Arifa agitatedly. He was further annoyed when Arifa did not get up. A *tatva pada* (philosophical song) by a *Fakir* was very close to Usman Saheb's heart...

Why belittle me in the name of swine...
Being Swine in mind, swine at home...
Bearing swine all over body...

Pork is *haram* for Muslims. So is anger. Usman Saheb had sung this song for himself many times, which equates annoyance with the swine, unholy and unsacred as per Islamic faith. In this sudden discomfort he failed to remember the song. Lost in anger, he shook Arifa's legs and she got up suddenly.

'Why the hell did you not sleep inside?' he asked her harshly and stepped out without waiting for her reply.

Storming out in early morning mist he headed towards the mosque which was at a distance of furlong from his house. His mind was still lingering around last night's incident.

[1] Manager of a mosque appointed by Waqf

His youngest and doting sister, whom he had lovingly sent to school till SSLC, whom he had married off five years back by giving her 18 silk sarees along with gold ornaments and a bike to her husband. But yesterday, biriyani and kheer prepared at home turned distasteful when Jamila put forth the proposal of sharing family property. How resolute she was yesterday? He got enraged once again by remembering it. She had even added 'brother... I have a right to this property as per the Sheriyat of Allah and the Prophet. I am not asking you to part a share of your wealth. What have you earned so far? Aren't you eking out your living only with father's property?

'Oh... She has come with calculations'. 'Here you take your 1/6th part of the property', Mutavalli saheb thought of slapping it on her face. He controlled the swinish outrage fuming all over his body. But he could not dare do that as her six feet tall husband who undoubtedly instigated this matter was sitting on a chair next to her as a body guard.

'You, who settle the disputes of entire *mohalla*, should have called and voluntarily offered my share'. Let it be... What about sister Sakina? She neither has husband nor children who can earn for her. How will she marry off her two young girls?'

Mutavalli Saheb was staring at the ground. It was astonishing to see her talking all this. Why have I kept mum? Mango grove, coconut farm, paddy field, silk cocoon fields, and houses built in city were reminded of. What of these should be shared with my four sisters?

Jamila kept on talking like a croaking frog. 'Brother... you married me off to a good family, I don't deny it... but you please think over... it is ten years since father died. Had you given my share then, by now I would have earned ten times more than the expenditure incurred on my marriage. I am not asking all those accounts but...'

Mutavalli Saheb had enough of it and was getting completely impatient. Standing behind doors, Arifa was listening to all this. Jamila's argument sounded bad to her but there was logic in her demand. Who can refute it? Was

not Mutavalli Saheb given a house worth 4000 rent and a coffee plantation from her parents as Arifa's share of property? Arifa got this share without demanding it. Arifa's parents invited both Mutavalli Saheb and Arifa, served them tasty food, gifted a saree and handed over the property documents after registering it in her name. Similarly, Jamila should get it but has to fight for it.

Mutavalli saheb got up heaving a big sigh. He stared at Jamila for once. She looked frightened seeing her brother's attitude. Gathering courage by looking at her husband she spoke as if she had mugged it up, 'If you do not give me my share I will go to the court' she said it finally. Startled, Mutavalli Saheb rushed straight to his bedroom without speaking a single word. Frightened Arifa, standing behind the door, made way to Mutavalli Saheb wasting no time.

Mutavalli Saheb sat on the cot like a statue without taking his skull cap off head. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead. Arifa was quick to switch on the fan.

...All these events came to his mind. As it was winter, water was kept for boiling at the backyard of the mosque. He mechanically completed the ablution and even Namaz. The mind was yet to be cleansed though the body was washed. He was perplexed by Jamila's behavior on the one hand and was saddened to part the property on the other. Retaining the property by punishing her was the major problem for him. The sprawling mosque had less attendance for Namaz. He had to return home inevitably as there was none from his known circles who attended the Namaz.

He was very reluctant to return home. Madina hotel had opened when he reached the circle after walking slowly. A cup of tea at Madina Hotel did not cheer him up. Walking in the most disheartening style, he reached the middle of the circle and stood where the police used to stand. Only thing he did not do was controlling the traffic by blowing a whistle. He looked at all directions from there. It was pathetic that he had no clue as to which direction he should move in. In the meanwhile, an unpleasant incident took place. A crow fell off the livewire like a dry leaf falling from a tree. Noticing this

incident that took place at a stone's throw, Mutavalli Saheb was preparing to move, a crow came cawing. This sound turned an echo and soon many crows gathered at the site. For him, the cawing of some crows sounded pitiful while some sounded harsh. Some resembled a sigh and some sounded like a trumpet. Amidst this situation as he prepared to leave the place, some crows pounced on him. He hurriedly stepped forward. While keeping an eye on crows, he noticed of them... He exclaimed, 'Oh rainbow colors amidst a dark colour...'

Having returned home reluctantly, Mutavalli Saheb felt sleepy as he entered his bedroom. Arifa was busy with household chores. She had to look after her ailing son, besides getting other children ready for school along with the preparation of special food for Jamila and her husband. She did not like Jamila to go back discontented. She was reminded of her mother who once said '*Haqdaar tarse tho angaar ka nnhu barase*' (rain of fire befalls when a rightful inheritor pleads). The previous night she had told Mutavalli Saheb in a very thin voice... do not grieve the daughter of this house. The Quran makes it amply clear on Property Rights to the girl child. Wash your hands off by giving the share in property to your four sisters, Allah will bestow you *barkat* in your earnings' Arifa was not in practice of giving suggestions to her husband. Mutavalli Saheb was not a stranger to this as he had settled several disputes. And was Arifa speaking anything new? How would the words of a woman who is to remain only in a burqah sound tasteful to him? 'You mind your own business' said he and slipped into snoring.

Pressing *chapatis*, Arifa was perturbed. *Ya... Parvardigar...* bestow him good sense'... she prayed fervently. She had just now placed a wet cloth on Ansar's forehead. Pressing and baking *chapatis* mechanically, she abruptly felt as if Ansar was moaning with pain and came running to the hall. Then she saw that woman... Arifa immediately recognized her. A worn-out and dingy saree was peeping out from spotted burqah which was almost faded and turned grey. The sight of cracked heel, faded complexion, torn

slippers repaired with a safety pin reduced Arifa to tears. Arifa grew even more grieved when she saw that woman, being hesitant to enter the house, standing in the corner of the veranda amidst male visitors, who had come to meet Mutavalli Saheb. She could not bear to see this sight. Standing behind a *purdah* tied down between veranda and *hajara* she whispered 'sister Sakina... I beg you..., come inside, why are you standing there...'

Arifa was not sure whether the burqah-clad woman listened to her or not and she could not make out the facial expression of the woman. But a youngster standing next to the woman said 'it is okay *Maami* you carry on with your work, we shall leave after meeting *Maama*'. Sakina is her eldest sister-in-law. A self esteemed woman, who toiled for livelihood as well as her children after the death of her husband and took to tailoring. She did not expect even a drop of water from her maternal home. During festivals she came home to seek the blessings of her elder brother by touching his feet. Today... she is standing like an outsider. She called Sakina to come inside the house and for a while thought that she too must have come for the share in the property like Jamila, but she did not think much of it. However, her effort to make Sakina sit in the hall went futile. Waking up after a good sleep, Mutavalli Saheb was taken aback to notice Arifa peeping through the curtain to see the visitors assembled in the corridor and making hand gestures. In a raised voice 'Arifa' said he. Moving back swiftly, 'Sister Sakina is standing outside along with those men. I was calling her to come inside'.

'What? Mutavalli Saheb grew agitated after seeing Sakina and her son outside.

Pleading with folded hands Sakina, in most unfamiliar voice, 'Bhai Sab, help this hapless widow. Allah will shower peace and prosperity on family. My son is now in first B.A. Today there is an interview for an attender's post at the Engineering College. I am told that you are one among the committee members of the college. My son's name is Syed Abrar. Please recommend his name for the post. My family

and I would be supported if he gets this job. I am told that my son would get this job if you put a word. Please have compassion on me'. Before Mutavalli Saheb could utter a word, she handed over the application form and stepped out after touching his feet.

The crows were cawing in Mutavalli Saheb's mind. His face turned red once again. He perspired despite winter. He collapsed on a chair. Tears rolled down on Arifa's face.

Holding a baby close to her bosom, a woman was standing at the door. Adjusting the *pallu* over her head, also standing at a distance said she 'Sir, the father of this child pulls a bullock cart. He underwent an operation 15 days ago. I sold both the bullock and the cart for his operation expenses. But the doctor says one more operation is to be done. I have nothing with me. You...' she did not speak as her voice shrunk and tears rolled down.

Mutavalli Saheb collected the details of the doctor and the hospital and assured her of possible help. The woman left after expressing gratitude.

A school boy kept a notebook in front of him. The head mistress of the higher primary school in her neat hand writing had requested Mutavalli Saheb, who was the SDMC chairman, to attend the meeting at 3 p.m. at the school. After singing the notebook, Mutavalli was about to turn to the next visitors, Dawood came like a storm.

Dawood was his right hand. He had become indispensible in his life. Both Dawood and Mutavalli Saheb had a strong bondage owing to similarities in thinking. Dawood had a flair to discern the intentions just by looking at wrinkles on face of Mutavalli Saheb, creases on his eye brows, his sturdy moustache, nostrils and wrinkles at the loose end of his lips. Gift of gab, politeness, back bowing, shamelessness, wolfish nature, bereft of love added to his features...

'Where had you been Dawood Saheb? You were not seen at the mosque?' asked Mutavalli Saheb calmly. Dawood understood both the question and the manner. Pretending to be obedient, 'Assalam-OAliakum Mutavalli Saheb', he sat benevolently.

Mutavalli Saheb was not only the management committee chairman of the Mosque, but also active in politics. He was under the false impression that he could influence the entire Muslim voters and believing this to be true, vote-mongers used to visit him unfailingly. Therefore, large number of people used to stand at his doorstep. Sakina sought for help from Mutavalli Saheb not as her brother but as a politician. She had damaged him emotionally by behaving like an outsider. Mutavalli Saheb took a glance at the visitors. Many were waiting for their turn. Since he had urgent work with Dawood, Mutavalli Saheb looked at the visitors in anxiety. As he got up, grey-eye-browed Sab Jaan stumbled towards Mutavalli Saheb and said 'Saheb, my last daughter's marriage... next week is the marriage... I have no money. Please, be large hearted... I can die peacefully if she is married off... Have mercy on this old man...,' he came forward to touch Mutavalli's feet.

'Ah... last daughter... you have fathered many children... Have you fathered at the age of sixty? At last... you have come on track...' The Satan in him guffawed. A dilapidated house and a sprawling site came to his mind. An idea of building a shopping complex at this site was erected in his mind.

'What do you want from me Sab Jaan *chacha*?' asked as if guilelessly.

'Nothing... Stopped for a second uncertainly, 'I am in need of forty thousand for this marriage'

Mutavalli Saheb pretended beguilement.

'Ah... forty thousand... what to do... how to arrange?'

Mutavalli Saheb lost in deep thought. Dawood coughed slowly.

'Saheb... let me bring a matter to your attention... If you make yourself free... See how the world has changed.... Is there no value for ethics, nobility, and piety'

'What happened... Dawood?'

'Oh, Don't you know of this matter?'

He continued as there was no response from others. 'Islam is being disintegrated... The dignity of Muslims is ruining'. His introduction was rather too long.

'Tell me what is the matter' said Mutavalli Saheb impatiently.

'Saheb, Umar, the horseshoe maker, who had married off his daughter to Nelamangala, whose husband married one more girl..., her brother...'

Peeved at being embroiled in the confusion of relationships, he yelled 'Who was he?'

His name is Nisar, a painter.... who made away two hundred rupees in the pretext of painting the mosque during last Ramzaan...

'Oh... I remember,' Mutavalli Saheb remembered whipping him black and blue by tying him to a tree.

'He died by jumping into a tank... his dead body was exhumed last month by the police...'

'So... what happened now?'

All ruined... 'The police buried him in Hindu graveyard...'

Dawood muttered. Mutuvalli Saheb skipped a heart beat hearing this. He began sweating and for a moment the visitors forgot their purpose of visit. Sab Jaan chose not to propose his daughter's marriage again, though he was really worried. The sudden news has left them in worry.

How strange... a dead body of a Musilm, buried without *Kafan*[2], *Gusul, Janaze ki Namaz*... Mutavalli Saheb asked 'Didn't Nisar have Khatna'?

'No, No, how is it possible.... The police washed off their hands without breaking their heads...

More questions followed... So was the inquisitiveness... How did they learn it was Nisar's body?'

'His wife lodged a complaint with police when Nisar went missing for long. After taking the complaint, she was shown clothes and Nisar's photo. She identified both the clothes and the photo. It was the photo of Nisar's swollen dead body. 'But... Was it really Nisar's Body?'

---

[2] A white cloth that covered on a dead body

'The police must have done deliberately. They could have enquired with us at the mosque. We would have buried the dead body in a minute.'

Dawood spoke with suspicion. As far as I know, Shankra did all this with the help of police'

'How unfortunate... people run after a *janaaza*[3] to bid adieu to the department soul. How pitiful that this unfortunate man was buried without a *Kafan* over the body...!'

Ramzan and Bakrid were the only occasions Nisar attended the prayers at the mosque. A habitual drunkard, who cheated people after taking advance amount for painting houses. The last rites of Nisar, who had even cheated the *Jamaat* by taking advance for painting, appeared most sacred and a holy ritual for them. For Mutavalli Saheb the last rites of Nisar's body appeared as a remedy for all his problems.

'What to do...as you sow shall you reap...' said he. Dawood and others were stunned by the tragic developments.

'Tauba, Tauba', said Sab Jaan patting his cheeks 'Death is certain. But one should die with dignity. No Darud, No salaam... who knows one day our bodies might also be disposed wherever they want...'

Dawood also joined Sab Jaan. 'Mutavalli Saheb, because of you we have remained dignified humans... one fine day they would even drag the Quran to court... Look at Shabano issue....they have blown this issue out of proportion and crushed us again and again. Now... They are burying Muslims whoever they want. Is it not injustice?' For Dawood, it was nothing less than a conspiracy.

All the visitors were sad. Mutavalli Saheb looked up suddenly at the visitors after a deep thought. He covered his face with hands and coughed to clear his throat. He fingered his beard and dug his nose alternatively. The matter became so serious that Arifa forgot to get her children ready to school and stood behind the curtain. Jamila, waking up a bit late, whisperingly asked Arifa and got to about this news. Both

[3] Funeral

kept their ears very close to the curtain and listened to the conversation outside.

'Ya Allah, whoever it is... May one get a three meter space to lie down in *Kabristan*'

Jamila's husband also came to know this news and he too joined the people sitting in the hall. Apprehension and dismay filled the hall. There was a zest to fight for the cause of Islam. Finally Mutavalli saheb spoke.

'We all should make efforts to take out Nisar's body from there and bury him here. We should be ready for any eventuality... Understood...?'

'Dawood... inform our Youth Committee too. Let us all meet both the DC and the AC... Let us start from today itself...' he also added 'tell them not to worry about anything else. The Jamaat has no money right now and inform all that I would bear the expenses.'

Mutavalli Saheb sensed that the popularity and the support he gets from this cause, was much more than money. Moreover, it was the dignity of Mutavalli post... Out of his sheer experience, Mutavalli knew that people would not hesitate to put money under such situations. It was also an opportunity for him to draw the Youth Committee close to him, which has distanced itself from him leveling unwanted charges.

It happened exactly how he wanted. Jamila's husband took out two hundred fifty rupees from his pocket and kept on the table. 'Bhaiayya, I would be grateful if you take this money for this noble cause. May Allah bestow you with health, energy and money,' he said. As of now he thought it was not proper for him to pester his wife to demand for share in property. Jamila heaved a sigh after listening to her husband carefully. She had proposed the matter of property share owing to the pressure from her husband. She was not for it wholeheartedly. Arifa felt proud of her husband. She ran into kitchen to make wafer thin *parotas* for her husband. Feeling a bit relaxed after observing behavioural changes in Jamila and her husband, Mutavalli Saheb came inside elegantly.

He met the Deputy Commissioner along with huge number of youth naturally made Muavalli happy. The Deputy Commissioner was a young man, a Bengali Brahmin and a student of graduate from Jawahar Lal Nehru Univeristy. He was aware of social conflicts which can cause furore when emotions burst out. He understood the background of the incident after going through the memorandum submitted by Mutavalli. He chuckled for himself but sat observantly. Giving a patient hearing to Mutavalli's words, he questioned him in Urdu.

'So Mutavalli Saheb, you have never come to me regarding any other problems of your area... no bore wells in your area... school needs a repair...' Mutavalli Saheb stopped him and said 'We shall come with a list next time Sir, but regarding this issue if you can issue orders now...'

'But Mutvalli Saheb, why discriminate the soil, it is the same wherever you go...; he said casually.

Mutavalli Saheb had plethora of unconcerned answers for this. Without prolonging, the Deputy Commissioner issued an order to Assistant Commissioner.

Fifteen days passed, Mutavalli Saheb did not feel tired to meet officer after officer. He did not hesitate to spend money for tea and breakfast for his associates. He was a little dispirited when Shankara did not show much opposition to the incident. But the police and the government officers had their own hindrances.

Mutavalli Saheb used to hold discussions either at the veranda of the mosque till late night, or at the Madina Hotel or at his house. He made it a point to explain his hard work in this issue. He made plans to curtail some officers. He suggested to the youth how to protect Islam from dangers and threats. Nisar's dead body and Mutavalli's hard work were most discussed issues at homes. Many women prayed for the redemption of Nisar's body.

A large amount of money was poured in for this sacred cause. At last, Nisar's body was exhumed. Mutavalli Saheb and his followers wrapped the decomposed body with a starched Kafan. The dead body could not be given a sacred

bath as it had decayed. No signs of nausea were exhibited but the police covered their noses with handkerchiefs. The funeral procession of Nisar's body began as Mutavalli and his followers started carrying the Jannaza on their shoulders. The Jannaza was covered with jasmine flowers and a *chadar*. The body was applied scent to prevent the bad odour. The jasmine flowers were not in full bloom. '*Har Phool Ki Kismet Mein Kahan Naaz-O-Urs, Chand Phool Tho Khilte Hain Mazaron Ke Liye*' (Not all flowers bloom for happy occasions, some bloom for graveyard too).

The funeral procession had a long distance to go but the crowd was huge. People shouldered the Jannaza alternatively. Striding along the city limits, the procession reached a curve. From there the burial ground was just ten steps away. As the crowd was moving close to the cemetery, an inebriated man hurling abuses in a tumultuous and archaic voice was heard. Mutavalli Saheb stood thunderstruck and bewildered to see that drunkard. Not only Mutavalli, the entire crowd was in a great shock. Nobody stepped further. There was an eerie silence after that. A policeman went running after the drunkard and intimidated him with a *lathi*. The man slowly sneaked into a narrow street after hurling filthy abuses. Mutavalli Saheb soon understood the crux of the situation and stepped forward carrying the Jannaza on his shoulder. The Jamaat also moved forward. His legs trembled convulsively. As someone offered to shoulder the Jannaza, Mutavalli Saheb took his handkerchief to wipe the sweating and looked furiously at Dawood. He could not meet an eye with Mutavalli Saheb. The eyes said it all in the crowd and stepped fast towards the Kabaristan. The police stood outside the Kabristan an. Finally the body was buried. But the veins in his mind were about to blast in the Musilm Kabristan. Whose body is it anyway?

Undoubtedly, the drunkard who hurled filthy abuses was none other than Nisar. In the raging anger, Mutavalli Saheb thought of butchering both Dawood and Nisar's wife. However, he was happy that his skin was saved as the Jamaat did not utter a single word despite identifying Nisar

near the cemetery. But his forbearance disappeared next second. He felt as if thousands of crows were leaping over his head... Was it a dead body of Hindu? Or Musilm? Should a body decayed beyond identification be buried here...? ... or there?

People were in haste to cover the grave with gravel and were in great hurry to return home. Mutavalli Saheb had no one with him today, except the crows which were waiting to pounce on his head...

Mutavalli Saheb was totally exhausted as he sat on the corridor of his house. He felt uncomfortable not seeing Arifa around for long time. 'Arifa, get me glass of water' he called out.

'Didn't you go to school today?' asked he looking his daughter in the place of Arifa.

'Mother is not home, so I stayed at home,' she said.

'Where has she gone?' asked Mutavalli Saheb. The girl had wept for long and as a result eyes had become red. She said: 'Since Ansar is sick, mother is at the hospital....'

'What..? 'Sick...' '...' 'Who...?' When...? The shooting of questions made her tears heavy while rolling down.

'Ansar had high temperature since 15-20 days. Doctor has said it is brain fever,' she continued weeping. The glass fell off from the hands of Mutavalli Saheb.

'Brother... Give me the share in property...'

'Brother, please help this hapless widow...'

'Please help for my daughter's marriage...'

'Haqdaar Tarse Tho Angaar ka Nhoo Barse...' He heard these lines repeatedly.

Black, grey crows... rainbow color amidst them...

SEVERED TIES

Mitra Venkataraju

Mitra Venkataraju hails from Kundapur and has published collections *Rukumayi*, *Mayakada Satya* and *Hakki Mattu Avalu*.

SEVERED TIES

When mother's cooking was in progress in the morning, the gate creaked. 'Gangamma has come. Gangamma has come', bleated someone. Gangamma, a distant relative, was a basketful of news.

Gangamma belonged to mother's native place; she was very fond of her. But she would not get excited when Gangamma came.

'So, you're here. Come', she would say and, turning away, continue to do her work. Mother was very busy then.

'Where from did Her Highness land up here?' Gangamma would be asked, and lemon juice would be kept before her in a tumbler.

'I'd gone to Rama's house at Belthangadi. From there, I had to go to Chandri's. She compelled me, 'you should come home'. Do you know how long it is since I went to Sulya? So I went there. I crossed the houses and the fields and even stayed at Ramesha's house for two days. Our Vishalu had come home — could you place who it is — our Cauvery's daughter. I came this way with her. Having come this way, how can I return without meeting Kamala? So I came here. I'll stay here only for a day. I'll leave the day after tomorrow. They said Naani is going to Kundapura. I asked him to put me into a bus from there'.

Stories of the houses she entered and left, news about the village, the sensational matters she heard — fresh, breaking news circulated like paddy that gets de-husked.

Mother would grumble saying, 'I'll be finished if I keep listening to your stories. You've nothing to bother about. If you stretch your leg and sit...' or —

'Who wants to listen to her stories? I'm busy with cooking and other important matters. She narrates the stories of the houses of all and sundry... She doesn't have anything else to

do. I don't even know if I added the right quantity of tamarind and salt...,' mother would grumble and continue with her cooking.

'Do you know I went to Chandri's house? They say aunt Cauvery is unable to see these days. Is it true, Gangamma? ' Mother could not stop herself asking at least that much.

'I had been there for the last *Sankranti* festival. She said her vision has become blurred. It's a relief that the daughter-in-law takes care of all the domestic chores. Cauvery does her work by feeling her way around. Listen to this hilarious one. Janaki and I had gone together to her house. Janaki had got made a *godhimani* chain during the last *Deepavali* festival. She had worn it. Cauvery could make it out. She kept touching it, asking, 'What's that shining around your neck?' and gave her approval saying it contained no less than three and a half sovereigns of gold. What do you say about this?' — The description would bring the incident before one's eyes.

As soon as one story was finished, another one began: 'Well, Kamalu, don't you know what happened to Appanna?' 'Why? What happened?' When she saw mother's innocent face, her enthusiasm skyrocketed.

'If you see his plight, you won't be able to digest the food you eat. He doesn't take bath. He has such a long beard. He eats if he wishes to; otherwise, he just lies down'.

'Wasn't he the one who worked as a conductor for some time?'

'Conductor! Nothing of that sort. His mother is left with nothing, but to cry always. They say he gets possessed by a spirit sometimes. When he's possessed, he howls, 'You're all sinners. A burden to the Earth. You must be slaughtered'. And when a few people overpower him... Ayyo! I can't think of the plight of that boy'.Gangamma would feel sorry.

She would be laughing the next moment: 'Can the mouths of braggarts be shut? Some say the son is paying for the misdeeds of the father. Anyway, it's destined to be so'.

Meanwhile, she would order, 'If you want to make *athirasa*, soak some rice in water. Let's prepare it after having lunch'.

'What else! I'll soak rice and everything else!' Mother would mutter, yet rice would always fall into water.

And thus, after lunch was done with, preparing athirasa would begin. But then, even as pounding, sifting and heating was in progress, there would be not an iota of respite for chatting.

'Well, your daughters have grown up as tall as poles used for plucking fruits. Isn't it time to search princes for them?' She would have an eye on us when we moved around here and there.

'I happened to see our Lepakshi's son. She'd brought him to the car festival of Koteshwara temple. He's tall, well-built and handsome. He's a doctor... I don't know how to say it. He's learnt something else too, they said.' Her statements are links that are melded with each other. 'My dear lady, you must've heard that Lepakshi's sister Lalli got operated in her stomach. Though there's some relief, she continues to suffer from stomach ache. Once, when I'd gone to *Saligrama*, I broached the matter openly: 'Why can't you go to Manipal and get yourself examined?' Do you know what her husband Senappa said to that? He said, 'She refused it absolutely'. It's ridiculous that she refused. She said she was scared. What's there to be scared? Will a tiger eat her there? I said that I'd accompany her, and we'd see what would happen. I was with her in the hospital for fifteen days. Even after she came back home...'

Thus, Gangamma's mouth should keep on churning. At night, even after we fell asleep, she went on talking. It would start before we opened our eyes in the morning.

Once, when she got up in the morning, she noticed *karikesu,* a green, which had grown profusely like weeds in the colony of the Paaysara community nearby. She called out, 'Lo! Kattu Bai', and jumped to the backyard straight away, and, enquiring the joys and sorrows of Kattu Bai, selected Kesavu leaves, plucked them and even planted a couple of stubs she had brought along in a corner of our front yard. She washed the remaining leaves, wiped them, removed the stalk and began a programme. Thus, there would be piping hot *patrode* for lunch in the afternoon. In the meantime, if someone desired to have *Mysooru Paak* or *Haalubai,* even that would get ready.

Mother would actually keep fretting throughout. 'I can't manage to jump around with her'.

Gangamma expected nothing else. All ingredients should be available in a trice. She would ask mother to bring this, get that, find something; she would tire out mother's limbs. She would not make even a bit of compromise in any of the ingredients that were used. Even if one of them was not available, she would move heaven and earth and get it from someone or the other, and include it. Once, she bewailed that there were no coriander leaves. On such occasions, her mind became very sharp. She called the man who had come to the neighbour's house to chop firewood, persuaded him to run to the shanty half a mile away, and succeeded in making him get it for her.

Only those who have savoured her cooking know how tasty it is. 'If all the ingredients are added in the right proportion, won't it be delicious?' Mother would not refrain from saying it.

By then, the discussion turned to the lump in mother's legs, she would say, 'Well, let me do something about your ache. Come here. I'll apply a little oil and massage it', paying no heed to mother's protestations, 'I think there's no one to monitor you', she would scold and massage mother's legs.

In the midst of all these activities, Gangamma would not give rest to her mouth. 'How's Gowri's younger brother keeping now? Has he recovered? Take it. Give him this medicated oil. Doesn't he come on Sunday? I brought it from the *panditru,* the *ayurvedic* doctor, at Barakooru. Let him massage himself with it every day'.

'My dear lady, hasn't your brother-in-law's son finished studying medicine? Ten years have lapsed'.

'I heard that your Nagaveni's daughter's wedding was celebrated with pomp. What delicacies were prepared? Where did you say the groom is from?'

In this manner, the preparation for the onward journey would take place.

The next evening she would fly away in a jiffy, just as she came.

Once, when Gangamma arrived as usual, Gethakka was in the final year of her B.Sc. course. She was preparing for the examination. The moment Gangamma arrived; she began her broadcast in a loud voice.

'I had been to Shringeri and was stranded there. Annapurna's daughter had delivered a baby. Poor Annapurna, how can she manage things alone? I stayed there itself for three months and attended to the mother and baby. This time, I couldn't go anywhere. Seenanna had come to attend to some work at the bank. I went with him to Udupi...'

Geethakka, who was memorising equations in organic chemistry was neither able to study, nor listen to Gangamma's talk. Feeling irritated, she banged the book that was in her hand on the table and said, 'It'd be so nice if Gangamma could be made to shut her mouth'.

Sanchikki, who was ironing clothes right there, said in a teasing manner, 'Geetha, I know of a good idea to make her shut her mouth. Shall I tell you?'

Sanchikki was none other than Shakuntala, mother's youngest sister; she used to stay with us those days. Though she was married and had a child, she was still mischievous.

'Is it true? Tell me, tell me. What kind of an idea is it?' insisted Geethakka.

'You ask her just this much — How's your daughter Paddi now? — Just this much! Wait and watch. You'll come to know for yourself if what I say is true or not'

'Certainly! Shall I give it a try?' Geethakka became enthusiastic. Geethakka cleared her throat and, like an actor entering the stage, went to Gangamma and stood before her. Gangamma's flood kept on flowing. 'How're you? Why have you shrivelled so much, like a dry stick? It seems to be the case with children of the present times. Annapurna's second daughter will not even be able to withstand a whiff of air

blown at her. Are you studying for the examination? you don't want lunch or snacks...'

'Gangamma, how's your daughter Paddi now?' Geethakka interrupted Gangamma's talk as if she was parroting what she had memorised.

The transformation that took place in Gangamma's face in a moment was so conspicuous that Geethakka was reminded of litmus paper.

'Don't broach anything related to that slut before me', she yelled in a high pitch, all of a sudden, and then fell silent. She had been sitting on a wooden plank on the pyol; she leaned against a pillar nearby and sat still like an idol, gazing somewhere into the distance. The entire house was enveloped in a pall of gloom. Mother got scared and she came out rushing; she was furious with her children, and, especially with Sanchikki.

'How far can your childish prank go? Why's it said that there should be a limit to everything? One instigates, the other carries it out...' Mother kept muttering as she scolded us.

'Gangamma, what happened? Do you want some more? Do you need water or anything else?' Gangamma remained stupefied to mother's questions.

In the afternoon, it was a herculean task to make Gangamma get up and finish the routine of having lunch. After finishing her lunch, she climbed the pyol in a hurry and lied down with her shoulder serving as a pillow. She did not open her mouth. Not a single sound came out from her mouth till she left for her place with Seenanna in the evening.

After Gangamma left, Geethakka could not resist. 'Oh! What kind of a silence was that! Mother, why's it so? What's happened to her daughter?' she asked.

'Why poke your nose in her affairs? Don't ask me anything. I won't tell you anything', said mother and left the place. Her anger had not subsided. Sanchikki gestured to me to keep quiet for now and that she would tell me everything later.

The sense of guilt that had already begun to bother us did not subside after we came to know the whole matter.

Sanchikki, only after making sure that mother would not hear, broached the matter of Paddi. It is said that Paddi is Gangamma's only beloved daughter. Her birth was like a ray of hope in the family which had been struggling to make ends meet.

Gangamma's husband cultivated a couple of acres of land he owned. Once, when he was doing some work, he stepped on a mound of ash in the front yard; a boil developed in his leg; he became bed-ridden, and he was said to have had diabetes. Eventually, he passed away. Gangamma was orphaned all of a sudden; Paddi became the centre of her life. Whatever she earned or saved was all for the good future of her daughter. Paddi, too, was active and good-looking. She had round eyes, a sharp nose. She had the same complexion as that of Gangamma, reddish and fair. Besides, there was something attractive about her. Looking at her daughter's beauty, Gangamma was quite sure that she would get an alliance from a good family.

Supposedly, Gangamma had many dreams about Paddi's marriage. Even before she turned sixteen, Gangamma began circulating her horoscope. She pleaded with her husband's younger uncle's children and sent the horoscope here and there. She had envisioned that if a groom from a prosperous family could be found, later, she could take care of her grandchildren and live with her daughter and son-in-law till her death. As planned, enquiries were made with well-to-do families.

But, one fine day, Paddi went missing before it was daybreak. There was no trace of her though a thorough search was made. No lake, no well, nothing was spared. Relatives of Gangamma's husband and neighbours left no stone unturned in searching her. Gangamma was wailed bitterly. Her Paddi had vanished.

The unexpected nature of this tragedy which came without any clue caused an upheaval in her life. She found life to be burdensome.

Eventually, nearly a year later, Gangamma received Paddi's letter from Mumbai — I'm doing well. You needn't

worry about me. If you need money, I'll send it across... A thousand rupees was enclosed with the letter.

Gangamma was crestfallen coming to know of this news. But she stopped grieving and steeled herself up. She sent the money back through the children of her brother-in-law who lived next door, and she considered her daughter to be dead.

'It''s said that all sorts of people used to come to their door for timber trade. The relatives of Gangamma's husband stayed next door; they traded in timber. Both the houses had a common front yard. Logging used to be done in the backyard of Gangamma's house. Paddi would talk, chat and indulge in banter with all and sundry who came there. Then, everything appeared so fine to the mother. Wasn't she the favourite daughter? There was no clue about any of these things. Right then, she must have got close to someone'.

'Even after all these things have happened to her, how keen is she to gossip about the affairs of the households of others!'

'That's exactly what irks me. It was I who discovered her vow of silence', Sanchikki saw us as if asking us what we had to say about it. We were curious.

'Before I got married, I didn't approve a couple of alliances and they got stalled. Supposedly, this Gangamma kept announcing wherever she went — the youngest daughter is unlike Tara and Kamalu; she's very arrogant. She even tried to counsel me when she came home. I hit back by broaching the matter of Paddi. She fell silent for four days. She covered herself completely with a blanket and went to sleep'. Sanchikki laughed clapping her hands. As we too joined her, the sound of mother's toe ring was heard.

'Shut your mouths. Aren't you ashamed? You should be born again to understand the pain Gangamma carries in her heart. None of you is worth even her foot', said mother, and when she went aside, there were tears in her eyes.

'Wandering from place to place and gossiping about everybody! Is that her greatness?' blurted Sanchikki.

'Since it's her, she's holding on to her life. Anybody else would've plunged into a lake or a well', said mother without turning this side.

Sanchikki is very stubborn. She does not like to give up. She whispered, 'If she had done so, all this hullaballoo would vanish'. This fell on mother's sensitive ears. Turning around, she slapped Sanchikki on her face. All of us sat dumbstruck. Sanchikki, too, had not expected it. She closed her face with her palms and began sobbing.

'How far can the tongue be let loose! She dares to talk! If you're alive today, it's because of Gangamma, mind it' Mother said that and was unable to speak further because of her fury. She went away.

We lay down on the floor here and there to sleep, but it took quite a while for us to fall asleep. It took some time for us to comprehend what mother had said. We were perplexed whether mother spoke out of fury or if there was any truth in it.

The next morning, as soon as she woke up, Sanchikki went to the kitchen with a puffed up face and asked mother, 'Could you explain to me what you said yesterday? You went on shouting, and it appeared like a riddle. What's the great secret that I don't know about?'

'Go, wash yourself up and come. The coffee is getting cold', said mother as if nothing had happened.

'You don't evade the issue. I'll go on a hunger strike till you tell me. I won't touch food and water. You keep watching', threatened Sanchikki.

Mother kept quiet. But, when Sanchikki's hunger strike continued till the afternoon, she had to become alert.

'Don't be so adamant, Sakku. Come, have your lunch'. When mother cajoled her, Sanchikki did not budge.

'Something slipped out of my mouth, and she has held on to it. It's nothing big. I blabbered recklessly out of the anger I had about you'. The justification mother gave was of no use.

Ultimately, mother had to yield.

'Well then, listen to me. When you were in your mother's womb, your mother was weak. She'd delivered fourteen

children. You were the fifteenth one. Is it an easy task to take care of so many children? Were facilities available then as we find today such as doctors, medicines? Don't know what happened to her. I believe your mother got some medicine from a *Shudra* woman and consumed it. I, too, am not sure of it. Gangamma was present there. She came to know of it, took your mother to task and got the medicine removed'.

'If you don't want the child, I'll rear it. You needn't worry about it. God will take care of everything'. Gangamma, the virtuous one, gave courage to your mother and took care of her. She was so devoted in taking care of your mother that it appeared as if she guarded her. Her service to your mother post-delivery, and rearing the child is of no mean measure. Your mother didn't have the strength to lift the child. It could be said your mother was restored to life', said mother and ordered, 'Get up, now. It's time for your brother-in-law to come for his coffee. Take your plate and finish your lunch quickly'.

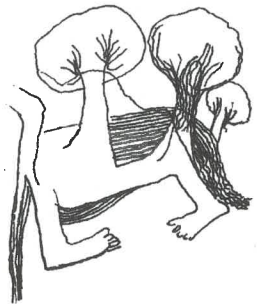
Translated by
M.R. Rakshith

POEMS

BELAGERE JANAKAMMA

Belagere Janakamma (1912-1966) is probably the first Kannada woman poet of modern times whose poems voice elements of resistance to oppression predominantly. As the first woman poet of the Navodaya period, Janakamma wrote poems invoking Kannadaness and Kannada identity. *Sirigannada* is one such poem imagining Kannada nation as the mother of Kannada children and emotionally expressing that Kannadaness is part, in every aspect, of the life of a Kannadiga. She enjoyed a lot of importance during her time.

DON'T TAUNT THE POET



I beg you, please, don't taunt the poet.
What do non-poets know of poetry?

Stop the eulogy, stop the applause.
Do poets care about praise or criticism?

Who can tell what emotions surround him?
Who can tell what revolutions chase him?

What province drives him round and round?
What captivating adventure exhausts him?

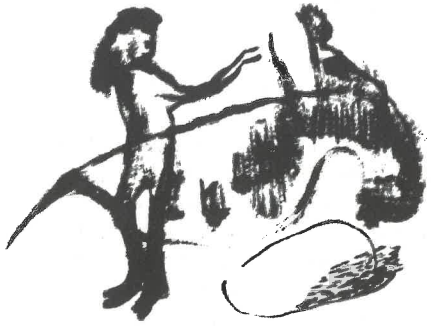
Who knows what inspires his soaring heart?
No, don't taunt him, says poet Janakaje.

Translated by
S.R. Ramakrishna

PRATHIBHA NANDAKUMAR

Prathibha Nandakumar is a Bangalore-based poet, short story writer and playwright. She has also been active as a journalist and documentary filmmaker. She has several poetry collections to her credit. *Anudinada Antaragange* is her memoir. Prathibha"s other publications include short fiction, translations, essays, and biographies of women artistes. She is presently the Director of Surya Creative Services, a media services agency, and Kriya Foundation, a culture foundation. She has been invited to present her work at various festivals, including the Gottenburg International Book Fair (1997), the Asian Writers' Conference in Helsinki (1998) and the SAARC Writer's Conference in Kathmandu (2002).

PAINT ME A FOREST



I said I am a kaleidoscope
If he turned me around he could
discover changing patterns and colours.

He said he didn't see three sides of me
bound by a string or glue and
coloured glass pieces turning inside
making tinkling noise.

Then I said I am a sculptor
I could chisel any granite or marble
and give life to beautiful damsels in dancing poses.

To that he said he couldn't see my hands
used to holding chisel and hammer
more so bring out rhythm in hard rock instead
he found them ugly knuckles kneading dough.

Later I said my songs made
the most troubled soul go to sleep like a baby
he could very well test it on the couch neatly laid.

Now he was distracted, wouldn't hear any of it.
He simply took a look at my enormous body
and preparing his colors said he would paint me red
so instructed to lay bare, offering my multi textured
terrain.

He took me with his brush strokes and pencil
etchings
and charcoal rubs and crayon stubs and created
a lush
green forest full of singing flying birds where
flowers blossomed at every valley and high.

There were many buyers for the art but he declined
to sell. He then put me under a shower and washed
me well, like a rain forest glistening in wet season
the colours running down the drain.

*

FORBIDDEN, SAYS WHO?

It is forbidden for us to write about breasts
But you can sing epics about them.
It is forbidden for us to display our thighs, naval and
cleavage
But to conquer and rule over them is your privilege.
We should not pollute our vagina
But you can, at any time intrude into it.
Female foetus should give way to male
But you can rape even infant baby girls

Within the four walls of the kitchen or beyond its
threshold
In front and back yards, below the staircase,
bathroom, terrace,
Courtyard, balcony, by lanes and streets, parks,
libraries, schools, collages
Offices, trains, bus, car, metro, even rickshaws
You can take us anywhere, anyhow, any time,
by the virtue of being a male.
One penetration can make all the change
From chastity to debauchery

From purity to impurity
From pious to poisonous

We should cover up our bodies and minds
Not to entice a gullible Adam
we should
Cut away our breasts
Stitch up our cunts
Abort, walk away wiping our bleeding thighs
zip up our bashed up lips
and not trouble the gentlemen.
If you float high on such pretentions of male pride
before long you will touch base
when the needle of reality bursts your balloon
And when that happens...
we will have no problem passing time because
a woman is a woman
post menopause.
But you...
Aap ka kya hoga janabe ali...

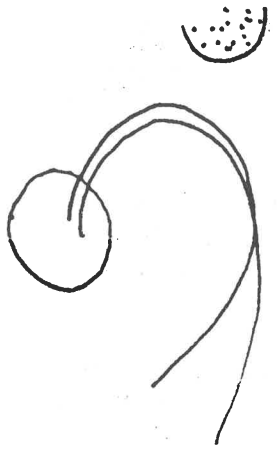
Translated from
Kannada by the poet

MALATHI PATTANASHETTY

Prof. Malathi Pattanashetty is a poet by temperament. She has written short stories, literary criticism, translations, and has put together literary compilations.

Her works include anthologies of poetry like *'Baa Parikshege'*, *'Garigedari'*, *'Tande Baduku Gulabi'*, *'Mauna Karaguva Hottu'* and *'Eshtondu Naavegalu'*, short story collections like *'Indu Ninna Kathegalu'* and *'Soorya Muluguvudilla'* and biographies of Basavaraja Kattimani and Srinivasa Vaidya. She is currently the chairperson of Karnataka Sahithya Academy.

MY SUN



Child
In this world — yours and mine — is wonder,
the root of all creation,
the essence and philosophy of life,
the maternal instinct to protect creation.

The world is
me to you
and you to me.

This story — yours and mine —
is as old as the universe, child.
You bloom like a flower.
Everything looks new:
the everyday and the eternal.

Have you brought in your fist
a gift for your mother?
Fistfuls of love from God?

Child, you are God's gift to me.
To make me complete, the Creator
granted me a mother's position.
For your fistful of love,
how long I have waited, boy,
keeping my heart open.

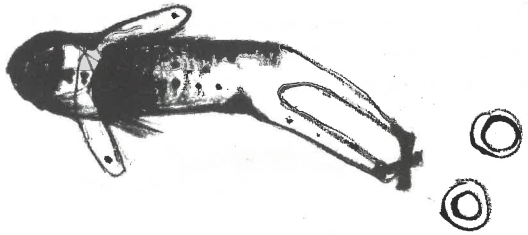
You are the sun of my life, darling,
the moon, the temple of stars.
Your eyes twinkle brightly.
Does the divine flower adorn your hair?
I sniff and break out in tears of joy.
When you smile, a happy bird
beats its wings and soars in my heart.
Cry and fall asleep, aha! an ocean of peace.
Waves of empathy rise in my heart.
I get my title of mother only from you.
God gave you to me to make life worthwhile!

Translated by
S.R. Ramakrishna

LALITHA SIDDABASAVAIAH

Lalitha Siddabasaviah is an important contemporary Kannada poet. She hails from Tumkur and has about five anthologies of poetry, a play, collection of short stories, and a collection of humourous essays.

DAUGHTER TO A GOOD FATHER AND WIFE TO A GOOD HUSBAND



Kambhaiah and I
sat hammered
to the same section
of the same office,
not for one or two
but nine years.

Like goddess Maramma,
I was ready to fly into a rage at any taunt,
but this man like a payasa
gave me the same advice
all through those years:
'Times are bad, madam.
What is the point in fighting
and frowning, Lalithammore?
Let those who talk become big.
Tell me, who can claim
attendance here for ever?'

He not only offered advice,
but also followed it.
When seven juniors
climbed his back

and sat on his shoulders,
he saluted them, and hung his head.

He conducted himself
like the son of *Kunti* —
oblivious to his wife being disrobed —
when others pocketed increments due to him.
Without a sigh, he accepted his relieving orders
and moved on every time he was transferred.
When garbage from elsewhere
was heaped on his table,
he cleared it, like Saint *Somananda*.

2

Such a daughter of Kambhaiah —
she would turn up at office to seek money
even for a hairpin or notebook,
and her voice was so feeble
she might not have heard it herself —
was arrested.

Believe it or not, she spoke
without a thought
about poor Kambhaiah.

The valiant 24/7 TV channels
showed the same scenes
over and over again,
till you went blind.

What happened within their walls
had never reached a third pair of ears,
but it was suddenly the talk in every home.

3

In her own words:
I chopped up my husband
and stayed home with the pieces for three days.
I surrendered the fourth.
I was tired of a good father.
I didn't want a husband like him,
a man who, when someone spat on him,
would wipe his face and return home.
As daughter to a good father
I had closed my ears and eyes.
As wife to a good husband,
I had to close myself
to all chances of happiness.
How long could I show off
this *tulasi* plant of pretension?

Let them play ball using this head
of Kambhaiah's daughter.
Holding a lime, I will stroll happily to the gallows.
I must rid my head
of this thorny creeper of goodness.
That is the reason; this is just a pretext.
This is how I chopped up
this vegetable of a husband,
how I stuffed the pieces away.

As the young girl told her story,
without raising or lowering her voice
or even crying or masking her face,
even the old policeman broke out in a sweat.

4

It should be enough if you put out
your dictionaries in the sun
once in a hundred years.
The words might free themselves
from the jail of singular meaning,
and interpretations of good and evil
rid themselves of bookworms.
Our Kambhaiah's daughter
might join the line of pure women
we remember at dawn every day.

God, grant this wish,
at least.

Translated by
S.R. Ramakrishna

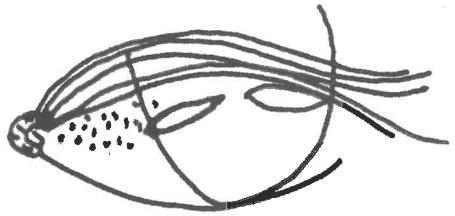
---

tulasi: basil plant, revered as an earthly manifestation of goddess Lakshmi.
payasa: a sweet dish.
son of Kunti: Yudishtira, a major hero in the Mahabharata.
Somananda: a 10th century Kashmiri philosopher.

SANDHYADEVI

Sandhyadevi is among the important poets of Kannada today. Writing a foreword for her *Jhalakke Mukha Belaguttide* collection, the late writer U.R. Ananthamurthy said, 'It is difficult to analyse her poems, it may eventually turn out to be an arrogant attempt of the critic.' A meditative, mellow quality pervades her poetry.

THOUGHTS OF PERFUME



Perfume was in a bottle,
poetry was in a title.

I poured out the perfume,
and slyly beckoned the poem.

The poem had once wept,
rolling in the perfume.

It bounced across pages:
Oh, such rare meaning!

It hurtled leagues forward
on the wheel of time,
yet thoughts of perfume
remained daubed on its mind.

*

THE MIND THAT LEFT

Sometimes, the body
slips away from the mind
and walks far, far away.

Here
It goes plonking
with big, heavy steps,
and works like a machine.
It washes clothes,
cleans utensils, cooks,
and so on and so forth.

And also, like others,
it eats, drinks,
bathes and dozes off,
and even falls asleep.

There
Where did the mind
get its wings from?
Where has it reached?
How many miles an hour?

Translated by
S.R. Ramakrishna

CONVERSATION

WOMEN WRITING IN KANNADA LITERATURE – TRENDS AND ISSUES

Conversation between
Savitha Nagabhushan
and Sabitha Bannadi

Savitha Nagbhushan: When the editor of *'Ulume'* magazine approached us to write about trends in women's literature, despite our best efforts, we haven't been able to discuss it. Perhaps this reflects in our writing as well. We give priority to writing only after all our other work and priorities are met. But by the time we get to it, the inspiration to write is often lost. For us women, our families, our children, our professions gain precedence over other creative endeavours.

Sabitha Bannadi : I have been reflecting on this aspect since morning. A man would invest time and energy to develop his interests and profession. He knows how to project himself in society. But women don't think of it in these terms. We wait far too long for others' recognition.

Savitha: I do not accept the claim that there has been no major literary contributions made by women to Kannada literature. In whatever little time we have been able to spare for writing, I am happy to notice that lots of outstanding literary texts have been produced, especially when seen from the perspective of the past century.

Sabitha: If we look at modern literature, we observe that women in this first phase have been primarily concerned with the question of recognition. They looked outwards, at norms dictated by patriarchy, to develop a standard for their writing. However, they were disappointed, in that they did not receive the recognition that they expected. There were also no concerted attempts to create a culture of debate, criticism and inquiry among themselves in the context of their literary works. When

Tirumalamba first ventured into publishing, there were many obstacles to begin with. In the public space, there was no attempt to recognize women's writing. Due to this, much of the momentum was lost and women did not write as frequently as they would have otherwise. Even literary works with great depth did not merit consideration. Serious women writers perhaps felt compelled to write about topics that were generally favoured rather than what they actually wanted to write.

I am speaking of this based on my personal experiences on what drives and influences my writing. Often I have had people's opinions influence how I write and how I express myself. Unfortunately, we rely heavily on these opinions, recognition and encouragement as a benchmark to measure our own abilities. I speak of this specifically in the context of Kannada literature, because the same is not seen in some of the other languages. Perhaps they have transcended these hurdles, rejected the standards set by others' to chronicle their own experiences, without restraint. But this is not observable in our case. There is a certain kind of politics involved, where popular writers are given encouragement by magazines, newspapers and other media, so much so that they begin to believe that this is the kind of writing that they ought to be doing, despite the lack of critical acclaim and support by serious critics. Today, these writers of popular literature are side-lined, but in reality they find encouragement by the producers of TV soap operas and series, the majority of which is viewed by women.

Savitha: In the context of the completion of a hundred years of women's writing in the genre of novels, their contribution has grown in leaps and bounds. There were times when each woman writer had produced more than twenty novels by herself! In that era, their works might have been dismissed by critics as popular literature. But if we look back, we realise that these novels have created a culture of reading among innumerable women by

awakening in them a love for literature. This is no mean feat. These writers also knew that they wouldn't find acceptance from the literary critics. Therefore, they took it directly to the public and gathered a certain amount of confidence in their abilities from the responses of the common people. It is due to their efforts perhaps, that we still retain a love for the different forms of literature, be it prose, poetry, research or literary criticism. Critics have easily dismissed these writers and assigned their work an inferior status, but even among the influx of popular novels, some literary gems have been produced. We should remember that the likes of M.K.Indira, Anupama Niranjana were born during this phase in women's writing.

Sabitha: I want to speak about one more issue related to what you just said. The number of men who have dabbled with popular literature is more or less the same as women. Yet, they haven't been attacked in the way that the women have. The onus on women writers to prove themselves has always been more than it has been for men. Their writing was dismissed as being frivolous... but on the other hand, serious women writers who wrote with great depth were also not given due recognition. Their writing was still considered inferior to what men wrote. For instance, Narasimhayya who wrote several detective novels and was at the forefront of popular writing was not dismissed on charges of frivolity. When seen from the perspective of the times that they lived in, and the limitations within which these women writers had to work, we find that they are no less. There is no need to compare them with the established male writers of that age.Their circumstances were different from that of the male writers. For instance, Karanth travelled a lot and derived many ideas from his travels. These possibilities were not open to women. It was possible for Akkamahadevi to do so, and this is reflected in her writing. Modern society has succeeded in projecting women as nothing more than ideal mothers and

caregivers and succeeded in making women internalise this as well. Despite all these obstacles, women's writing has grown and continues to grow.

Savitha: Women's writing has been a response to the concerns and issues of the times that they live in. Although the majority of their works could be categorized as popular literature, there were many writers who had fresh perspectives to offer in their writings – Tirumalamba, Shyamaladevi, Savitramma, Devanganaa Shastri, Saraswatibai Rajwade, Kalyanamma, Kodagina Gauramma, Shantadevi Malvada, Anupama Niranjana, M.K. Indira, Veena Shanteshwar,Vaidehi, Rajalakshmi N. Rao, Vijaya Dabbe, Geetha Nagabhushan, Sara Aboobacker, Nagaveni, Nemichandra, Banu Mushtaq, Bhageerathi Hegde... and many such remarkable women. If the writers of popular literature could also write about what they wanted to express, what they wanted to reveal from their experiences, imagine the quality of the literature they could have produced if they were given a little guidance, the scenario would have been different...

Sabitha: But that kind of an environment was not in place for these women... The community of writers and critics should have been inclusive and supporting. But they never took it up as a cause ...The general feeling then was that there was no need for women to express themselves... 'Let women do their work, know their place and leave the writing to us' was what was commonly expressed. This can be seen in the discussion between Tirumalamba and Masti Venkatesh Iyengar. We are not trying to judge what is right and what is wrong. We are trying to show the repercussions of such an attitude over the women writers of that age. Kodagina Gauramma stood out as an exception and wrote fearlessly, in line with her convictions. Her stories were very promising, but, unfortunately, she passed away at an early age.

Savitha: Triveni has managed to present serious concerns in a delightfully entertaining manner. Her writings have a

vitality which interest the reader even though they address fundamental questions relating to women's issues. Her untimely death was a great loss to the literary world. Anupama Niranjana not only contributed to the genre of novels, but also wrote excellent literature relating to the medical field, drawing upon her experiences as a doctor. We should also consider this a part of creative writing.

Sabitha: Whenever we speak of Anupama Niranjana's bibliography, it is generally said that her writings improved as time went by whereas her initial stories are considered superficial...

Savitha: Whatever Anupama wrote relating to medical issues faced by women were composed in the form of stories or novels. I feel this is a major contribution to the field of Kannada literature.

Sabitha: And the stories written by her for children – *Dinakkondu Kathe* – is also a very important contribution, especially at a time when children did not have anything to keep them occupied, her stories provided an important means to awaken a love of literature among them.

Savitha: In the times that they lived in, the women writers, naturally, wrote in accordance with the economic, religious and political circumstances. Only a quarter of the women were educated, and a small group ventured into writing. In today's context, there are several budding writers among our young girls. Whichever way you look at it, knowledge of vocabulary and basic writing skills are prerequisites.

When you look at the present scenario, there is wonderful progress being made, as can be seen in the writings of Vaidehi, Veena and other women writers. Sara Aboobacker has raised several vital concerns in an effective manner... Similarly, scientist Nemichandra has wonderfully encapsulated her experiences in her stories. Bhagirathi Hegde has several interesting insights to offer

in the context of a farming family in her recent novel *'Holeya Haadi'*, which also contains several autobiographical elements. Unfortunately she is finding it hard to get it published, and consequently, the novel is not getting its due recognition. When I read it in a magazine, I remember thinking to myself what a wonderful work of literature it was. This is the fate of many works of art which go unnoticed.

Sabitha: Women have already proved themselves worthy of recognition in all respects, in the field of literature. *Burrakatha Eeramma, Mookajji* and those who popularised *Sirikathe*. We must remember that it was primarily women who were at the forefront... Another aspect I want to discuss is that at whatever phase of Kannada literature we are in, be it Navodaya, Navya, Bandaaya or progressive writing, women writers did not identify with them and wrote on a different trajectory guided by their self-discovery and personal experiences. There is no relation between these periods in Kannada literature and the contributions made by women. So it makes no sense to say, for instance that the Bandaaya phase influenced the writing by these women, because women were never in the mainstream. Women writers have been side-lined in these modern movements, because it was ultimately the men who decided if their writing could be considered as representative of the 'ism' that they believed in. Unless a text conformed to the philosophies of a particular sect, it was not considered worthy of recognition. However, times are changing. In the last twenty years there has been no particular thrust on any movement, which is why men have also reverted to a style of writing based on their experiences and own observations. There are more opportunities for budding women writers now. There are several platforms now for their voices to be heard.

Savitha: In the 70s several women were active on the literary front. Even though many of these writers have been

appreciated as good writers, I feel that there was a lack of interest in critically analysing their work. This is a serious lacuna that is faced even today. If critics were to concentrate more on an in depth analysis of the works of, say, Vaidehi, Veena, Pratibha, Usha, Bhagyalakshmi, Nagaveni, we would be able to grasp the literary merit of these texts. Who has read Nagaveni's *'Gandhi Bandaa'* in this perspective? Or tried to compare it with other texts, for that matter? Our young women writers should also become literary critics to raise the bar on the quality of Kannada literature. This will give us a balanced view on what goes into a great text.

Sabitha: However, care must be taken to avoid the pitfalls of analysing a text, based on the writer's caste or the community to which they belong. To illustrate, Triveni's works have been criticised on the grounds that they represent only the experiences of the Brahmin Community. Literary criticism should always analyse the essence of the text objectively.

Savitha: The only benchmark of a critic should be to see if the text serves the intended purpose, gets across the message and whether or not it has the potential to be considered a great text. We should keep in mind that the experience of each writer varies with their background and circumstances. If we continue this redundant culture of politics and sectarianism, there is no hope for raising the standards of our literature.

Sabitha: When we speak of sectarianism, we realise that women's voices are absent in several of the literary movements. If we take the instance of Dalit literature, the experiences of women is not represented enough. The need of the hour is to create an environment conducive to better literary output from women.

Savitha: Although we have quite a few educated writers, A dialogue centring exclusively around women's experiences has not yet emerged in Kannada literature. Because of the use of English as the medium of

instruction, the preference to write in Kannada might be decreasing. There are at least 10-15 promising poets today which re-instils my faith in women's contribution to poetry. However, the literary output for prose is rather disappointing. A few years back prose writing flourished but there seem to be few takers today. We cannot predict how these trends will shift in the future.

Sabitha: But this is an issue that applies to the whole of Kannada literature. We cannot predict what direction this will take. However, I am not pessimistic about it. Because of the renewed vigour with which some youngsters from the corporate field are writing, I find new hope. What is important now is that we take an integrated view of Kannada literature without getting into the gender debate.

Savitha: Our children might begin to write in English in the future. It remains to be seen if they will be rooted in Kannada culture and literary tradition. We cannot predict the kind of literature that will flourish in their hands.

Sabitha: One thing to be kept in mind is that when we talk about the history of women writing in Kannada literature, we are not resorting to finger pointing or favouritism. We are merely outlining that there have been times when women's contribution to literature has been unfairly hindered. Ultimately, it is important to think of literature from a holistic view point, the man – woman equation does not enter into the picture. Although we recognise that such prejudice existed in the past, we do not want it to continue in today's times. Our literature can flourish tremendously well in the absence of prejudice.

Savitha: What I feel is that women should get equal importance in all aspects of life. And in the world of literature as well. The fundamental question is whether we are equally respected in society.

Sabitha: I agree. Unless we are respected in all spheres of daily life, we will not be valued for our literary accomplishments.

Savitha: They say women have progressed in every sphere, but where do we get the prominence that we deserve? There is a tendency to belittle our efforts even today. And this applies to our literature as well. But I am optimistic about it. Despite the politics, our women writers have not lost the inspiration to write. They are on a journey of self-discovery, trying to find a style of writing and idiom that is solely theirs, without internalising the already existing standards. The world does not understand the travails of continuing the effort in the face of such odds. We don't have the kind of support or space that can encourage us to reach greater heights... In my forty years as a writer I have seen several families. And everywhere it is the same situation. We need to transcend all this to grow. We do not have the freedom to say 'I am ambitious about my interests'. Why should women not be ambitious? Why can't we create our own space? Why should we wait for others' recognition? Unless we transcend these limits by our own efforts, no profound thought or contribution is possible. We shouldn't forget that all great works of art are built on an edifice of solid ideas.

Compiled from an audio recording by
Akshata K.
(*Ulume*, 2007 special edition)

Translated by
Niharika Shenoy

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

NENAPU: SIHI-KAHI

Excerpts from the autobiography of ANUPAMA NIRANJANA

Anupama Niranjana (1934–1991) was a doctor and writer of modern Kannada fiction and non-fiction. She advocated the woman's point of view and her novel *Runamuktalu* has been made into a successful film by Puttanna Kanagal. Born Venkatalakshmi, Anupama practiced as a physician. Anupama took to writing early in life and wrote several novels and stories dealing with social issues, particularly women's issues. She was married to the Kannada writer Niranjana, a leading novelist of the Progressive school of modern Kannada literature.

NENAPU: SIHI-KAHI

Four

'Lakshmu, I have been transferred to Bengaluru,' my father announced to my mother. My mother got anxious and said, 'God save us!'. She continued to spell it out, 'We have lived all our lives in villages and somehow managed to sail through. Bengaluru is an expensive place to live in. With the salary that you get how will we make a living with the responsibility of six children?'

'We kept the hearth burning all these days somehow. Similarly the days will continue to fade in and fade out. Shifting to Bengaluru will be good for the education of our children.'

'Nothing matters to you but education. That is your only concern, your only preoccupation,' said my mother angrily.

Actually, my father had no clue how the house was being run. He would hand over the salary to his wife and borrow from her whatever little money he required on a daily basis. He would go to work riding a bicycle. He never ate out nor had the habit of smoking cigarettes. The clothes that he used to wear were inexpensive. In spite of all these economic ways of living, poverty was still a part of our family, and our relatives and friends often remarked in a pitiful tone, 'Shivaramnna is a very disciplined man. But poor with many children to take care of.'

Under such circumstances I joined the High School in Malleshwaram as an S.S.L.C. student. Bengaluru is a city and all the girls in school were quite fashionable. I, who was neck deep in inferiority complex due to our economic condition, went further deep in the complex because of the way things were in the new environment.

The day I joined school I did not know where to sit in the class. The front rows were all occupied. 'Venkatalakshmi, can't you recognize me?' asked a girl from the last bench. She was a short-slim girl with golden textured skin and sharp eyes.

'Oh. You are Swarna, aren't you?'

Swarnagowri was my classmate in Tumkur. She was the daughter of Rajshekhar Odeyar and though rich, she never flaunted it and was very simple, witty and also willful. I was very happy to see her and happily sat next to her.

Swarna introduced me to the girl who was seated with her in the last bench. Her name was Indira. She too was fair skinned and while with them I appeared darker than what I actually was. Indira was a soft-spoken girl and a humble one. She would just mind her business. We three become good friends.

One day pointing at a slightly tall girl, Indira said, 'That is Kamala. Daughter of Dr. Shivaram.' I had read *'Koravanji'* written by Dr. Shivaram and heard that he is a doctor of good repute in Bengaluru. Though from a rich and famous family, Kamala had no streak of arrogance in her.

There was one Shakuntala in our class who was tall, wheat complexioned and beautiful. Pride oozed from her eyes. She was the daughter of the famous industrialist G.A. Acharya and extremely intelligent. If the teacher of Mathematics wrote a sum on the board saying, 'Let me see who solves it the quickest,' she would solve the sum even before I could note it down in my book. I had an aversion for Mathematics and always a mediocre student in that subject. So whenever Shakuntala solved sums at the blink of an eye I used to be stunned and at the same time have great admiration for her.

I completed S.S.L.C. in the year 1949 with first class marks. Swarna and Indira also had cleared the exams and all of us were excited about joining college. We all discussed and decided to join Maharani's College.

Getting a seat was not that difficult those days. Probably every applicant got a seat. We went and got the application.

My father urged me to opt for P.C.M. combination. 'No. That would mean I will have to deal with Mathematics. I will opt for C.B.Z. combination,' I said.

The fact that I need not deal with Mathematics was comforting, which everyone around me saw. What others did not see was that I was secretly nurturing the dream of becoming a doctor with the C.B.Z. combination as the stepping stone.

Swarna and I opted for the same combination of subjects. Indira opted for Arts. Though in different departments, we used to meet every day during lunch break. College environment strengthened our bonding. Literature was the decisive common factor for our bonding. All three of us used to read voraciously and followed our readings with intense and passionate discussions. Reading of modern literature prepared the ground for my future writing career.

The author who was the closest to my heart those days was A.Na.Kru. One day, Swarna said, 'A.Na.Kru.'s new novel *'Natasaarvabhowma'* has come out. Let us purchase it this evening on our way back.' She used to have the money to buy books. I was a partner only in reading the book.

We were such admirers of A.Na.Kru. That we had attended quite a few lectures of his in the city. We felt proud about his daughter Laila studying in the same college as ours. One of those days Swarna and I visited A.Na.Kru.'s house. We were so excited and nervous that we kept looking at A.Na.Kru. Without speaking a word, finally, A.Na.Kru. himself began the conversation by asking us our names. We introduced ourselves and when he next asked which books of his have we read, very enthusiastically and proudly we said, 'All.' He asked us which was our favourite novel and we almost simultaneously said, 'Natasaarvabhowma.' A.Na.Kru. smiled. We were served with coffee. Sipping coffee we conversed a bit with our favourite writer and got out of his place.

Science and Arts department had common classes for Kannada which gave the opportunity for all three of us to be

in the same class. Champaabai who headed the department of Kannada made a great impact on all of us.

Champaabai had a firm build. She was very serious by nature. A scholar in Kannada who when started to speak would display the length, breadth and depth of the language. We were in love with her class and used to sit in the first bench during her class.

After the 1st year exams Champaabai returned everyone's answer sheets with extensive commentary written on them. My paper and that of one more girl (who I can't remember now) were not returned to us. Champaabai asked us to meet her in the department.

I was under the impression that I had done well in the exams. But Champaabai not returning my answer sheet and asking me to meet her in person made me imagine the worse. I thought I must have not done well and Champaabai would yell at me. Very hesitantly I entered the department. On seeing me she asked if I am Venkatalakshmi. When I nodded she congratulated me saying I had topped the exam and asked me to retain the top position always.

My eyes became moist out of joy. In that state of mind I didn't even thank her. I ran out of the department with the answer sheet in my hand. I don't know if my marks made my friends happy or jealous because they never expressed anything.

Champaabai asking me to retain the top position remained with me. I kept wondering what she meant by that. Did she ask me to specialize, during my higher education, in Kannada? The literary enthusiast that I am might get strengthened by specialized and focused study of language, I thought. But I had already started fancying becoming a doctor for years by then. I was perplexed but put aside all the thoughts telling myself, 'Let me get done with college for now and decide it later.'

When I got back home, even before I entered the door, my brother Ramu broke to me the news of my short story winning a prize in the story competition. The news made me extremely happy. As I entered the house, my father handed

over an envelope to me saying, 'You have won the second prize in the story competition organized by the Kuruba Association.'

'Who opened the envelope addressed to me?' I asked Ramu. 'Not me but father,' replied Ramu.

I didn't like my father opening the letter addressed to me. But I did not express my dissatisfaction. I read the letter inside the envelope which said I had won the second prize and the prize amount was twenty rupees. It said I could go and collect the prize money any day.

'Sister buy me a shirt,' said my second brother Nishu.

'Buy me a skirt,' said my sister.

It was my first earning. Shouldn't I buy something for myself?

'Sunday is holiday. Let us go and collect the prize money on Sunday,' said my father. So on Sunday my father and I went and collected the prize money. We went walking and while on our way back we ate watermelon. The remaining money was used for house expenses.

That story was titled *'Vijaya'*. It was about the cruel ways in which doctors treat poor patients. Someone had narrated such an incident to me which became the inspiration for my story. Later it got published in some monthly magazine. Since it was the first story of mine to get published it still remains very close to my heart.

*

Five

Informing me about the public speech by Jayaprakash Narayan at Chikka Lalbagh, my father asked me if I would like to join him for the event.

Such events thrilled me. I agreed immediately.

That evening we went to the event where thousands of men had gathered. Jayaprakash Narayan hadn't arrived and some film music was being played.

After a while, two girls went on stage and in a melodious voice started singing folk songs. I could recognize them. I told my father that the one in right was L.G. Sumitra who had opted for P.C.M. and the one with her is her sister. My father asked if she was the daughter of L. Gundappa. 'Yes,' I said.

Almost after an hour Jayaprakash Narayan arrived. His was a very charming personality. The moment he started speaking there was pin-drop silence automatically among the audience. He critiqued the system with his analysis and his sense of humor. His words had an inspiring quality. I could never understand what took my father, a government employee, to such anti-establishment programmes. It still puzzles me. Such speeches made great impact on me during my formative years.

There was a girl named Saroja in Indira's class. She and I had become friends because of my stories. She would discuss politics with me. Once Indira, quite secretively, asked me to stay away from Saroja because 'she is a communist.'

Swarna and I were quite courageous. 'So what?' we asked and said, 'Let her express her opinions and we will express ours. If she makes sense only then we will accept her views.'

Our discussion with Saroja continued. One day she invited us to the office of Students' Federation. 'Where is it?' we asked. 'It is in Avenue road. If we go there we will get to know how we, as students, are supposed to get organized,' explained Saroja.

Saroja was a member of the Federation. With her we went to their office climbing a broken staircase. In the first floor there were four-five offices. On the left there was Students' Federation board and on the right the board read the name of D.S. Shivappa, an advocate. It got me worried because he was my uncle and I feared him spotting me there. But to my luck his office was closed.

The office of Students' Federation disappointed me severely. It was a small room and filled with dust and newspaper scattered all over. In a corner there was a table and chair. The table was also covered with piles of

newspaper. The Secretary of the Federation C.R. Krishnarao and Gopalakrishna Rao were introduced to us. Among the two, C.R.K. spoke quite a lot and smoked cigarette continuously. I assumed that all revolutionaries were the same. We spoke to them for an hour or so and came out.

Following that day, Swarna and I used to visit the Federation office twice a week after college hours. 'I do not believe in all these things,' said Indira and stayed away.

One day my uncle spotted me at the Federation office and complained to my father saying I am getting corrupted through wrong company.

My father never liked the idea of revolution. I had to face the wrath that day. He asked me why I had gone to the Federation office. I couldn't tell the truth. I told him that a cousin of Swarna was there and I just was accompanying her. My father warned me and ordered me to never go anywhere near the Federation. I was uncomfortable with the ordering but did not voice it.

Though I was ordered to stay away from the Federation I did not stay away. I used to go with Saroja to the labourers' colony, visited slums. The poverty of all these places made me sad. We told ourselves that we need to change this system and establish a new egalitarian system in its place.

At the same time Peace Committee was formed in Bengaluru. When asked by Saroja if we would like to be its members, Swarna and I happily became its members.

'Say No To War. Say Yes To Peace.' – was the slogan of the committee. International Peace Committee had sought a ban on bombs and wars like that which destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We had run a signature campaign for the same.

While collecting signatures some would ask us why we students were getting into all such things while we should ideally be concentrating on studies. When such questions were asked we had a ready-made answer: 'How can we study if there is no peace?' Even in college we formed small groups and interacted with other students in order to politicize them.

Without realizing the process I was already a part of an anti-establishment movement.

*

At around the same time my father got an offer to purchase a house near Malleshwara railway station. (Now it is called Gayatri Nagara.) The price of it was three thousand rupees. 'Where do we get that huge an amount from?' asked my father. 'Where else will you get a house at such an affordable rate?' my mother asked and insisted that we buy the house. Finally we bought the house. I don't know how my father arranged for the money.

Our house was some two furlongs away on the west of the Malleshwaram railway station. The ground was uneven and gutters had to be crossed to reach our house. I used to walk alone cutting through all these even at nine in the night.

'If we have a compound wall around our house we can grow some vegetables,' said my mother one day to which my father asked where the money would come from. Constructing a compound wall would have required a thousand rupees more.

I suggested we fence the house using tree branches referring to the several houses in the same are who had constructed a fence around their house in similar ways. 'But then who will dig and toil?' asked my mother to which I promptly said, 'Us.'

My mother had her roots in the village and was a hard-working lady. She showed us initially how to dig and my siblings and I dug the earth and with the help of our mother put a fence around the house. This took around two months of time to get completed. Not that it completely kept the cattle away, but we used to repair them whenever cattle dismantled our fence a bit. When it rained all the plants grew green.

On the right side of our house there was the Harijan locality. In broken huts there lived the wretched of the earth who I used to see every day in a starving and half-naked state of being. They would drag and bring dead cow on a daily

basis peal its skin off and then cook. I witnessed through them what poverty makes humans do. They would fight like animals. But at times would stand by each other united, if there is requirement. To make them more humane their condition should improve, I always told myself.

I used to cross their locality everyday while going to the college. I remember having written a short story based on their lives.

My day time and evening time would be consumed by college, works of Federation and Peace Committee. But at night I would focus completely on my studies. I knew that if I failed to get good marks in the inter-mediate exam I wouldn't qualify to become a doctor.

My mother was a great devotee. My father did not have much interest in these matters. During festivals my mother would ask him to perform *pooja* and my father would say, 'I am reading something. You prepare everything and I will come do the *pooja*. The room meant for the God and *pooja* was well equipped with all the requirements to perform the *pooja*. There was an idol of Subrahmanya who was our family God. There were silver idols of Lakshmi and Ganesha too which my mother would wash every day and decorate them with flowers. On the wall were the photos of Lord Rama and also that of my father. My mother would light incense sticks before all of them.

'Sing some *bhajan*,' she would instruct me. I would begin and my siblings would join their voice. I would sing in complete devotion. Father would come and ask, 'Is everything prepared Lakshmu?' and immediately our singing would stop. Father would perform the *pooja* and we all would touch briefly the holy fire and brush our head with the same hand. Banana *rasayana* would be served after the *pooja* taking which we would fall at the feet of the almighty.

Akkamma would say *pooja* should be performed in the same discipline as the Brahmins. Father on rare occasion, such as the day the sacred thread is to be changed, would read out some Sanksrit *mantras* which made us feel happy and proud. He had studied Sanskrit in college.

Ganesh Chaturthi was a festival which was celebrated in our house grandly. On that day the idol of Ganesha would be heavily decorated and we used to hang coconuts, custard apples in the *pooja* room. Some pieces of banana leaf would be placed before the Ganesha idol with some food in it. After the *pooja* was performed these leaves would be individually placed in all the rooms in the house. We would fight over who would keep which piece of leaf, with the food, in which room. When I asked my mother why this ritual of placing food in every room over banana leaf was performed she said, 'I have no clue. Our ancestors practiced it and I am just following them.' 'May be it is for the mice,' opined my brother. 'Which mice?' 'Isn't mouse the vehicle of Ganesha?' and we all laughed till our laughter was silenced by father asking, 'Who is it laughing unnecessarily?'

On the day of festival we all used to have food together. We kids found it like a punishment because father used to be with us while having food with strict orders that nobody should talk while eating. Why this practice of silent eating, he would say, 'While eating you should completely focus on eating and chew properly so that the food gets digested properly.' But in our minds our digestion demanded speech, fight everything at the time of eating! None of us had the courage to utter these words to father so we would silently eat as quickly as possible and be done with dinner.

Father was a slow eater. He would first inspect if the plate was clean, if the water in the tumbler clean. Only then he would start eating and eat slowly placing rice and curry in his mouth. The skin of the vegetables, green chilies would be kept on the edge of the plate neatly. If anyone spoke to him while he was eating they would not get any answer. After eating he would take some good amount of time to wash his hands his mouth and then some good amount of time to wipe his hands dry with a towel. He was obsessed with cleanliness. After all this he would lock himself in his room and study. While studying he would be oblivious to what is happening outside the room and around him.

Many a times he would forget the face of his children. We were six of us with two years gap between each one of us. Sometimes he would ask my brothers, 'Are you Ramu or Vishu?'

He was kind of disinterested in worldly matters. Once he asked Ramu which class he was in. His weak memory was a matter of joke for us. But it would worry my mother.

At the age of 45 my father completed an exam and got M.R.S.T. degree. At the age of fifty he pulled his socks up to do a doctorate. My mother asked him why was he venturing into all this and not be happy seeing his children pursuing education. 'If I complete my doctorate I will get a better job and a much better salary,' father explained.

This explanation pleased my mother. But when my father started studying books on child psychology my mother's comfort was shaken a bit.

I was a college student then and I used to wonder what thesis my father would write on child psychology when he doesn't understand the psychology of his own children.

Father got his Ph.D. two years before his retirement and it did not profit him much in any worldly ways. At the time of retirement he was D.E.O.

He would complain of some officials belonging to a certain community having cheated him and stunting his growth professionally. It could have been caste politics. But I had my own doubts about my father's abilities.

Translated by
B.A. Samvartha

NOVEL

SADANANDA

(Excerpt from novel)

M.K. Indira

M. K. Indira (1917–1994) is a well-known Indian novelist in the Kannada language. She has written novels like *Phaniyamma* which has won many awards. She started writing novels only after the age of forty-five. Indira's first published novel was *Tungabhadra* which was released in 1963. This was followed by other novels like *Sadananda* (1965), *GejjePooje* (1966) and *Navaratna* (1967). Her most well-known work is however *Phaniyamma*, which was released in 1976. Indira has written about forty novels.

Raju pursed his lips and sat quietly. The corner of his eyes and nose reddened. He held Sadananada's left hand tightly. The lines of the novel Angavikale ran swiftly before his eyes.

Ramananda's sensitive pen, which had poured sweet sympathy on the poor and oppressed, had been unforgiving about the callousness of the adult modern society.

His tongue was also like that. It could twist and twirl like a tender plantain leaf but the next moment could become as sharp as a dagger.

Which of this — sensitivity and harshness — was really his? Raju chose sensitivity and rejected harshness. He let out a light sigh. Turning towards him Sadananda said:

'O, I am supposed to be a rude fellow. My words are thoughtless like this. You may have felt upset. Don't take them seriously.'

He patted Raju's back lightly. Raju swallowed his tears and spoke softly:

'Che! There is no relationship between your words and me. However, I do want to ask you something.'

'No problem. Why one, you can ask me as many as you want.' Raju cleared his throat and said:

'Maybe you remember that I had told you about the lame daughter of my aunt?'

'O, yes, I remember. You had told me that she had lost her leg in some accident.'

'Yes, she is the one. She has lost her entire right leg. Is it possible to marry her off now?'

'Why do you think it is a big issue? Man is all powerful. We have the energy to do everything. The only thing that can pull us back is cowardice or laziness! Didn't I tell you that day itself, that you yourself can marry her, if we can get your elders to agree? But first, you should agree to this, isn't it?'

Raju lifted his face and looking into his eyes said softly:

'You don't really know the problems in our family. She should actually have been my sister-in-law. That didn't happen and then she lost her leg too. Not just that, six or seven year ago my parents chose a bride for me. They want the wedding to take place this year. How can all this be set right?'

Sadananda thought for a moment and said:

'Listen, my father is from your caste; my mother is a Havyaka woman; I am neither here nor there. Anyway you have seen me and know everything about me since then. I have not hidden anything. If your elders agree, I will definitely marry the lame girl. Look at this Sadananda once. What do you say?'

He was staring at Raju sharply. Raju felt frightened as though he was being pierced in the chest with a needle. Should he lose courage before him who had just a moment ago given him courage? He steadied himself and asked:

'Won't your mother object?'

Sadananda laughed loudly:

'Where can you find another mother like mine? She is so good. I already have her blessings to get married to anybody - lame or blind or widowed. She managed her obdurate husband and is now managing her stubborn son.'

Raju looked at him suddenly and asked:

'How old are you?'

'I must be around thirty two.'

'Then!'

'Don't hesitate. Tell me clearly.'

'I will marry Gowri. Will you marry my sister?'

'Is this certain?'

'You are the one who has to make it certain.'

He placed his palm on Raju's right hand and said:

'Alright, take this. I promise in my mother's name. I will certainly marry her. But you are the one who will convince your elders and your sister.'

Raju hesitated a little.

'You haven't even seen my sister.'

'No need to see. I have seen your father and you. If she has your nature, then that's enough. Listen you should not change your decision for any reason. I have lost a wife like Rama and suffered. After four years, I have suddenly made up my mind. If this also changes, my heart may well break. Let your mind be strong.'

Raju held his hand and looked at him. This was the same Ramananda's face that he had seen in the ashram. He bit his lip and without his knowledge two crystal like tear drops slid down his face. He softly said:

'No, I will not break my word.'

*

Gowri, who did not understand anything, kept looking at his face. He spoke again:

'Are you worried that I have contacted piles? I swear on you that I have no disease. I simply said it. I did all this drama because I wanted to marry you. I will tell you everything gradually. Now tell me, what is your opinion?'

Gowri's mind felt dazed for a moment. She spoke slowly:

'What kind of prank is this Raju? Don't make fun of me like this.'

He pressed her right hand to his heart and said:

'This is not for fun, Gowri. I am telling you truthfully. You too should be decisive now.'

Gowri looked at him. He too was looking into her eyes. A shadow of doubt crossed her face. She said softly:

'Raju you have not really thought about this correctly. We are not the only ones in this house. Will aunt and uncle accept this? What will they do with a lame daughter-in-law?'

'They will all agree Gowri. You tell me your opinion. If you are against it, see, I will give it up this moment.'

Gowri could not speak further. The incidents of her past kept crashing into her mind like tidal waves. Feeling that the world around her was swirling she closed her eyes for a moment. Then she opened her eyes. A hundred emotions tossed her about and her eyes filled with tears. A sacred

image hidden vaguely in the depths of her mind for many years was now manifest before her. Silently, she leaned against his sheltering shoulder.

He did not test her any further. Didn't talk to her again.

The lame Gowri was buried inside the strong arms of the unemployed, well- built, firm-minded Raju. They did not need words now. He gently wiped the tear drops flowing on her cheeks. What he had desired for so long was now in his hands. He is now sure that it is his. Unhurried, he gently tasted the sweet juice of the fruit.

Kamala was washing her feet in the backyard. A huge bee buzzed and perched on the blooming flower on the rose bush near the washing stone and started boring into it. Kamala looked at the flower.

'Why didn't anyone cut that flower? That bee is boring into it. If I could take the flower, at least Gowri can wear it. I should tell Raju. I cannot touch the plant since I am menstruating.' Thus thinking she went in. Gowri was not in her room.

'Where could she have gone, limping?' Kamala looked for Gowri in the hall and the dining room. There was no sound from Gowri. Kamala became suspicious. Soundlessly she climbed to the attic. She saw a different version of what she had seen below. A bee is tasting nectar here too.

Kamala felt faint. She did not stop there even for a moment. She came down quickly and slipped inside her room, pushing her door closed.

She sat in a corner, drawing her knees together. Her heart was beating fast. She felt as if she had climbed up and down a hill. The mind seemed uncontrollable.

'Raju, Gowri! How is this? How did Gowri climb up? What other calamity is awaiting?'

Raju wasn't like that. Janaki would always be here, but he had never crossed the line even once. Did his disease bring him to such a state? What will happen to Gowri if something went wrong?

Mother would come out any time now completing her pooja. What should one tell her if she asked?

She quickly got up and stood below the attic stairs and called to her brother in a low voice.

'Raju, come down quickly.'

Raju climbed down the next moment laughing and carrying Gowri. He deposited Gowri on the cot and informed his elder sister.

'I know that you came up Akka. Don't worry. I will tell you everything. I took Gowri on top. Don't ask her anything. I will myself tell you everything. I will not harm your Gowri.'

Achchamma came out of the pooja room and went out to perform the TulsiPooja. Kamala was silent thinking that it was not the time for such discussions now. Gowri, lying down on the cot, said:

'I can't say anything Kamala... I feel sleepy, I will lie down. He will tell you everything it seems, you listen to him.'

*

Ramanna drank the water in the glass and leaned back in the chair. Raju was sitting quietly. After ten minutes, the father stammered.

'What did you just tell me...?'

'I said my elder sister needs to be married off.'

'As they say, he who couldn't do anything planted opium. Who gave you this mad idea?'

'Why Appa, shouldn't we think of her marriage?'

Ramanna felt like laughing foolishly.

'This is what is what we call childishness. No Raju, we shouldn't do something so foolish. Already, my family matters are on people's tongue like tasty fried nuts. This is not Bengaluru or Mumbai to think of such things. If you live properly people envy you and when you fall they ridicule you. I am already half dead. Let's not think of such things now.'

Raju bent his head.

'If you say no, then let it be so Appa. I too don't want marriage.'

His father panicked.

'What kind of frivolity is this Raju? You made such a drama about marrying Gowri and now you are saying this?'

'Yes Appa, but both mine and Akka's marriage should happen together. If that is not possible, then I too don't want to marry. I am not marrying Gowri for my pleasure. Do you think Puttatthe can look after her?'

Rammana could not speak. He remained frozen and became thoughtful. He removed his vest saying it was hot. His thin chest and dull eyes which looked like worn out marbles told how tired he seemed to have become in recent days.

Achchamma stood near the door and asked:

'Haven't you finished talking yet?'

Ramanna did not reply. Raju said:

'Not yet, mother. You go to sleep.'

'Who knows what they are debating about, why should I stay,' she thought, went inside and putting out the lamp, lay down on the bed.

Ramanna asked quietly:

'Is Kamala upset or something?'

'No Appa, she has been very happy after knowing that I wanted to marry Gowri.'

'Then, this plan is yours?'

'Yes Appa. Why, shouldn't I do that? Didn't her husband die within a month of her marriage. She is married only in name. It's already thirteen or fourteen years since that episode took place. Should she spend her entire lifetime like this? Won't she feel bad? Even if she's alive she will have to spend every living day inside the house. How is it possible?'

Ramanna was also grieving about his daughter's widowhood. But he had decided that this was a pain which had no solution. His mind could not agree to sink so low in the eyes of his peers in his own town where he was born, brought up and lived for so long. That apart, he felt beaten down due to the derision he had faced over the past four years. All of it had happened because of his children. About Kamala he had come to a decision.

He had set aside some property in her name to ensure that she would not suffer any hardship after his death. He had ensured that she needn't seek help from her brothers even in her old age. Raju knew all this.

Ramanna said slowly:

'Whatever happens, this is not suitable for our people, Raju. If we had thought about it earlier, we could at least have given her a better education. But why should she study? Should she go out and earn a living? She does not lack anything.'

Raju too spoke very quietly:

'What can I say to that Appa? If eating and sleeping is to be considered life, then what is the difference between us and a forest tree? All of us will be married and enjoying ourselves and she will be living like a nun. This is not acceptable to me. Even cattle and insects don't suffer such a condition. If she was a man, by this time she would have been married thrice...'

The pain inside him softened Raju's voice. His words touched Ramanna'ssoul and aroused his fatherhood. In all his life nobody had asked such a question to him. This was a question which was his own. The one who was asking it was his own son. His heart started weeping. He closed his eyes in silent pain and ran a hand on his bald head.

'Ush... appa...' he exclaimed deeply.

Raju sat quietly. After ten minutes Ramanna asked gently.

'You are ready to get her married, but which great man is ready to marry a widowed girl?'

'The one who wants to get married himself told me...'

'Aaan...!' Ramanna instantly opened his eyes.

'Yes Appa. It seems Keshavayya's son wants to marry Kamala.'

'Which Keshavayya is this?' he asked curiously.

'Keshavayya from Madhuvana....'

'Who? Sadananda?'

'Yes Appa. He is the one...' Raju said without any inflections.

Taken aback Ramanna fell silent. The big clock in the hall struck half past eleven. The tick tock could be heard. Likewise Ramanna's mind also went tick tock between his family and society.

'Is this the plan both of you made during those fifteen days?'

'Yes Appa. He was the one who suggested that I marry Gowri. His mother is also a good woman. Akka will not have any problems. If you make up your mind, Akka will really be very happy.'

Raju was feeling happy thinking of his sister's future happiness.

'Isn't his mother from the Havyaka community?'

Raju wanted to laugh.

'Why do you want to think about all that Appa? Deshmukh was a deshastha. Who will ask all that now? When we are getting ready for the marriage of a widow, how will this become important? It's enough if he is a Brahmin. Isn't Keshavaiah one of us? Didn't he get married to a Havyaka girl so many years ago? Appa, if you agree, this will certainly happen. Otherwise neither she nor I will marry.'

The son was forcing his father to go through a trial by fire.

'Will Kamlu agree to this?'

'I will make her agree Appa. You don't worry about it.'

Translated by
Vidya Maria Joseph

PAGES OF THE PAST

MASTI VENKATESH IYENGAR'S RESPONSE TO NANJANAGUDU TIRUMALAMBA

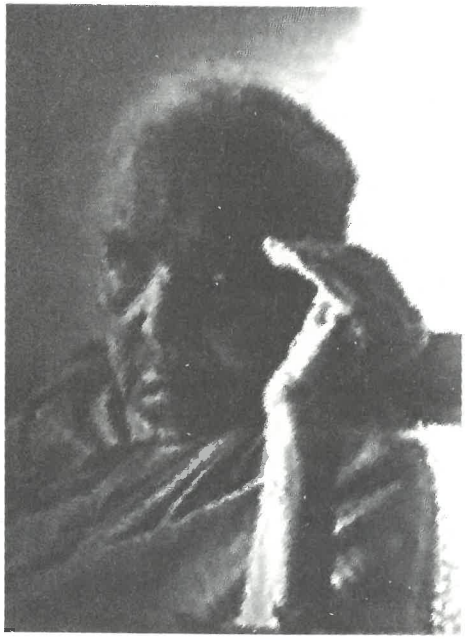
MASTI VENKATESH IYENGAR'S
RESPONSE TO
NANJANAGUDU TIRUMALAMBA

Nanjanagudu Tirumalaba (1887-1992) was the first woman writer in Kannada. She was married at 13, became a widow at 14, but learnt Kannada and Sanskrit and defied conventions to write, start and edit publications, with special focus to women. In her first editorial in Karnataka Nandini, a magazine she edited, she wrote: 'The general attitude towards women, in Karnataka, is not very high.People think that women are not capable of writing. They also think that women are not qualified to give opinion in matters of social reform: because her experience is limited to house-keeping.' The critical response to women writers in Kannada was generally negative though the reading public welcomed them. They pejoratively termed women's writing as 'kitchen literature', fit to be read only by other women. Neither she nor Kalyannamma, both child marriage widows, did not prescribe remarriage to widows, but the life of an ascetic, a tapaswini.

The Sati Hitaishini Chintanamale that Tirumalamba published, carried letters and responses to her works from readers. She got overwhelming appreciation for her work from people at large, but the literary community was not welcoming. Something that affected Tirumalamba deeply was Masti Venkatesh Iyengar's comments. Even though Masti appreciated Tirumalamba's efforts, he was highly critical of her writing. *Susheele* and other works of Tirumalamba earned severe criticism by Masti. 'She probably wrote it in a rush for a contest and is perhaps the first work of this author and hence remains very ordinary,' Masti remarked. However. Tirumalamba sent her essay *Sadachara* for a contest, and *Susheele* is not even Tirumalamba's first work. Masti got his facts wrong.

He continued: 'Everyone agrees to the fact that it is good for the country if women get educated. The author has stressed this fact repeatedly. But as it is commonly perceived, she too thinks that knowledge is the ability to read and write. If you know how to read and write, it is not true that you will become like Susheele, and if you do not know how to read and write, it doesn't mean women will become like Giriyamma. I feel this is a wrong perception.'

Without pointing out to any positive aspects about Tirumalamba's novel *Susheele*, Masti wrote a 25-page long list of faults in the novel, and this was hard to swallow for the writer. However, Masti's criticism cannot be viewed as serious, since it was one-sided.



THEMATIC ESSAY

THE MOTHER, IN OUR MINDS

B.N. Sumitrabai

B. N. Sumitrabai is an important name in the field of modern Kannada criticism. Among her key interest is the exploration of feminist culture. She has been associated with Samata, Jagriti, Achala, and Manasa in all their struggles and has remained to creative and intellectual rigour. *Kalyana Saraswati, Sarvatrikadedege, Sarahaddugala Aache Eeche, Mahila Neleyalli Natyashastra* are some of her works.

A very strong aspect of Indian society is the Mother worship. In all the sections of our diverse cultural paradigms, the worship of the 'Mother' is intrinsic, omnipresent. The state of the mind of the child in its foetal form, is what all our philosophers call the ideal state of mind, the path to achieve enlightenment. This is a state of heightened peace. 'Sarva tho vyapya vishwam' is an extension of the godliness that exists in the womb that protects from every other force. Both the joint family system and multi-level hierarchy system both expect the body and mind to exist as a single entity. Which is to emphasise that sum is part of the whole.

The bond between the 'Mother' and the child even from pregnancy is evident in the sculptures done for temples. In the Hindu temples, the sanctum sanctorum is called Garbha Gruha literally translating to 'the house of the womb'. To reach this man has to pass through a series of doorways of dim chambers that lead to darker consoles. The main idol is never moved from its original place.

This clearly indicates the person can be one with god only in a place that is as divine as a mother's womb. In other words to realise god, man has to become as he was in the womb of his mother. Thus, mother's influence plays a pivotal role in the perception of life for the child. Psychiatrists have recognised these impulses as those that are prevalent even before the Oedipus complex stage.

As a result, the influence of the father as the 'provider' and 'protector' does not appear very pronounced and there by mitigates his impression on the child. In the families of many Indian cultures it can be observed that the 'Father' figure is distanced from the children and this seems to be the accepted norm in most families.

It is not perceived as wrong that the father remains distanced from the child. Since the entire system is mother oriented, a child growing up under such circumstances doesn't pose contradictions. But as the system begins to move towards patriarchy, the father becomes cultural epicentre. It keeps gaining strength. When the father begins to occupy a demi god like position, the mother's position in society begins to oscillate. The mind finds it hard to accept the virtues and the vices of the 'father' as compared to the purist nature of the 'mother' where only compassion and goodness exists. Just as the clitoris is symbol for birth. It can also represent death. This symbol in majorly connected to the 'mother' but can also mean genesis and realisation. It also suggests a path between possession and desire. Ironically, the clitoris also represents a dark place also signifying death and the end of mother's love or mother herself. The dark matter envelops all matter, drawing into its womb, pulling fiercely everything in its wake, affecting an apocalypse, resulting in the genesis of a new evolution. This cosmic dance of destruction and evolution is the concept of 'motherhood' perceived by the Indian mind.

The mythological 'mothers' of the Hindu puranas are inspired by the multi-dimensional facets of 'motherhood'. The 'mother' who feeds her milk to the child transforms into a celestial being standing on a lotus and holds a vessel of rice in one hand to become the goddess of food (annapurne) or 'kaamadhenu'. A goddess with a power to bestow everything a man can ask for and to feed mankind forever with milk as the 'ksheeradaayini'.

Hindu goddesses are the embodiment of 'motherhood' and they propagate the essence of motherhood in their particular realms. The goddess of food nourishes the entire world providing sustenance and assurance that she would stand by her child all through his life to provide all his needs and thus, she becomes the omniscient philosophy for the needy and hopeful. They rely on this assurance and go on with their struggle of life. This belief of the people personifies into myriad forms of goddesses. Wealth, happiness,

prosperity and luck is represented by the goddess Lakshmi, who, when pleased blesses the man with ultimate wealth and her displeasure would only lead to poverty. Goddess Saraswathi is the goddess of knowledge and learning. This form is perceived by the bond between a mother and a child, when the mother plays the role of a preceptor and guides the child. Among the worst fears of man, Darkness (andakasura) which is slayed by goddess Parvathi to lead man in the path of light for his well-being, who also has to assume the form of a nemesis to make sure he does not stray from his path and thus representing the dual goddesses of Gowri-Parvathi.

There are several instances of the mother becoming terror in Indian philosophy. When a philosophy is universally accepted and gains social importance, it is imminent that an opposite thought is brewing simultaneously, says Lakaan. And this makes it clear how internal opposition is possible. 'Motherhood' is always symbolic of love, respect and compassion. Hand in hand, the feeling of repulsion were tied to menstrual cycles, child birth etc. You have treacherous mothers alongside the divine mother (the story of parashurama and renuka-yellamma is an example).

Let us see how the mother becomes terror with examples from our social life.

The identity of an Indian woman is constantly recognised in lieu with her relationship with the man in her roles of mother, daughter, wife and sister. Her role of a mother gives her the utmost privilege in comparison to her other identities. Therefore, she wishes for this privilege and gladly accepts this role with much fervour than any of the other roles she plays as she believes that being a mother grants her fulfilment. From her very childhood, the impressions of her mother will be embedded in a girl's mind. When she becomes a mother, she realizes the essence of motherhood once again. The innate characteristics of motherhood automatically emerge within her. She feels that she is the embodiment of motherhood and an astute sense of fulfilment engulfs her. Thus, Indian women are eager to take on the tittle of 'mother' as they derive pride and sense of achievement from it. This

sense is multi-fold if the baby is a boy. Giving birth to a male heir fills the mother with boundless happiness making her face glow and tears flow. A being for which she has poured life shall grow up to be her protector someday. It is only natural that she feels blessed and grateful. The mother secures a strong foothold in both the society and her family. It gives her recognition and the renewed position in the family. Especially, after feeling insignificant among her family members earlier. It is no surprise that she adores, loves, honours and even gratified for having her son. A mother feels more love for her male child than a girl in our society which gives her several reasons for the same. Mother, when she cares for her child, is influenced by multitude of factors. For example: when she herself was a child, the desires she felt which were unfulfilled translates into giving her own child such benefits. She utilizes her child to realize her aspirations. Even without her own knowledge she could be training her son to protect his mother in all circumstances. She would etch on his mind that he is the sole protector of his mother. Due to this the son feels compelled to awake his protective nature and sometime subject him to bring out his frustration, helplessness and disability. The gap that surfaces between the aspirations of the mother, that are not expressed genuinely and the inability of the son to grasp her motives subjects him to guilt, which later transforms into weapons of insecurity.

Transfixed by his mother's love, he devotes his entire life for her. This behaviour seems acceptable only till a particular stage. As he grows up as an individual and becomes an individual this behaviour could become over bearing and a danger of completely losing his identity. He could suffer mental trauma by not being able to progress under her influence and by not being able to detach himself from her. Unaware of this situation the mother can be conceived as an antagonist. As a result, the son trying to adapt to this situation becomes a parasite losing his identity, sometimes hating her inadvertently experiencing a void inside him.

The Hindu society grants the mother of the male child with a title, a special identity and a respectable place in the society. Due to unpredictability of life, the mother son relationship can be considered the most stable of all the relationships. Especially in the Brahmin community, the final rite of the parents has to be performed by the male child releasing them from the 'puth' 'naraka' (hell). This privilege was given to the couple who had eight male sons. This is why the elders would bless a newly married woman with eight male heirs. In the present generation this seems to be inapt. Although they have adapted themselves to suffice with fewer children,

Even today it is believed that the male child is symbolic for the perpetuation of the blood line. As a result the other relationships are centred around this concept. The western countries support the male dominant culture where man has the supreme power. In the words Ruben '...The mother becomes enslaved with the burden of raising the child and ceases to be much of a revered figure. On the other hand, the society urges the woman to be subservient to the man and take care of all his needs. If people of both the sexes share the responsibilities of bringing up the child equally, the child grows up having equal preferences to both the sexes. In a society that does not insist upon bisexual relationships, a girl child would not have the pressure to prove herself with the help of a man. The supremacy of the manhood by which both the man and the woman are measured, would not have existed,' says Ruben.

Her thoughts are based on the paternal prominent societies of the west, which is not true of the Indian society. The reason behind this is because Indians do not consider the sex of a person to be single-sided but layered, with different aspects. Sexual relationships should be based less on physical experience and should be more perceptive of the signals given by the opposite sex. Refusal to recognise these subtle nuances will result in complete denial of the existence of such relationships. None of the Indian cultures deny the natural urges of human nature and does not declare that

such nature should not exist. It has recognised the multi-layered aspects of sexuality and has an enduring approach towards it.

However, the Indian caste system acknowledged the ideologies of the upper castes as 'culture' and the beliefs of the lower castes as 'natural'. The women of the higher society were repudiated from any sexual freedom and for them to earn any social significance was through conceiving a male child.

It is interesting to note that the 'mother' character portrayed by our commercial movies and the mega soaps of our television is based on the model woman of the upper class. This woman is entwined in her relationships with her father, husband, and son. All through the story she struggles to maintain and enrich her relationship with them, which is her singular goal. It is the universal truth that, in all the serials, the female protagonist will go through great lengths just to receive the approval of the male characters important to her.

Even amidst the glorification of the motherhood, the woman is also at the receiving end of the power struggle along with the man. It is not easy for the person on the receiving end to play the role of the 'perfect mother', 'perfect wife' according to the demands of her culture and society. The frequently showcased rivalry and hatred among women, the nature of exploiting the weaker woman by the stronger woman [in the case of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law] has been the topic of great debate and research by many a psychiatrists.

This denigration of each other is not restricted only to the women, as highlighted and deliberated by the media. It is also prevalent among the men folk. Many such illustrations for these love-hate relationships can be witnessed often in India. The tradition of the divine spirit entering the body is the best example. Such occurrences are handled with tact and care by the power full religious communities which they do not treat this act as an abnormal action but as a divine suggestion and the exorcism is done in such a way that the

affected person will return to normalcy not only by body but also mentally. Thus, carrying out a 'treatment' without attracting any notice.

'A woman is the greatest enemy of another woman' is the most clichéd statement. 'Good woman versus bad woman' is highly dramatized by the society. In the cinemas this subject is linked with caste system and family back ground. The newly wed bride is usually portrayed as the element that enters a close knit family and divulges a family secret to the world and causes disgrace to the family. This supposed destroyer of the family can only be contained by a superior power, in the form of a mother-in-law or such other women in higher position. The over indulgence of the newly married couple in romance, can also attract the wrath of the senior family members as they believe that this new member could seize position of the most favourite person in the family and might upturn the hierarchy of power in the family.

If there is an incident in the family that tarnishes the image of 'the mother' socially or religiously in the eyes of the husband, if a woman is exposed to insult or insecurity by her senior, the glorification of motherhood starts to diminish as it poses threat of freedom and existence of the other women. The mother also fails to give an ideal 'son' to both the family and society and this could be the cause of her insecurity and instability. When the same women begets a son whose virtues are extolled, the situation is reversed and that woman takes a prominent position in both the family and the society. Such is the importance given to progeny in our society. 'Grant me a child o lord as I cannot be childless' is the woeful request of woman as she faces the wrath of our society, if she is considered barren. Such voices of pain can be heard only by women in a pitiful plight. Her voice can even be strangled by the so called powers of the male dominate society.

Mutual respect, affection are the basics of emotional strength and human justice. However, religious groups gain prominence as family and caste systems dictate the values that have to be up held in a society.[like caste/ family/ clan honour etc.] to maintain these norms the family uses love

and mental security as an instrument. It is not practical to implement the ideologies of the ancient family systems which were usually joint families, in our present life. The present is fast paced and inflation is soaring; to adapt those ideologies is impossible. The modern life demands an individual's freedom, social justice and political freedom as a right. As a result we can observe the disintegration of the system based on the sex of a person.

The crumbling of the caste, sex, status and the strata of the society give rises to fear, of that the new system which would bring, fear of new situations, insecurity for not being able to face such a situation. These are normally felt in periods of transformation. In such times religious associations hold functions and gatherings with the intention of reviving the old traditions [for example the revival of sati system and child marriage]. They also try to dissuade the people from selecting a free lifestyle and adopting modern ways which will only need material accumulation [for example... city woman who indulge in kitty party and devious financial deals which can only lead to betrayal and loss of money].

The present need calls for contentious decision between the modern and the ancient. Motherhood is a state that completes a woman's desire for life and her natural yearnings. However, the religious, financial, and social entrapments that revolve around this state rob her the freedom of experiencing the satisfaction it provides. The modern woman is emerging boundless to any of these pressures. She lives in the metropolitan city, full of easily available facilities. Such women make the choice to become a mother, even outside the institution of marriage to fulfil their natural desire for progeny. Often such women disregard the role of the father figure and are bold enough to full fill roles of the both the parents by themselves. Some women adopt children to fulfil their desire for motherhood as they do not believe only in biologically motherhood.

Even today the social system of marriage-progeny-family life-parenthood are followed by the majority of the people. The

existence of the mother is true until her children call her so; the riposte to how she will be able to protect her children from many aspects of life including mental afflictions is not easy. Especially for the middle class woman who has to choose freedom in her sexual life and if she chooses to raise the child on her own, she will be subjected to many perils like financial independence, emotional instability, mental trauma and the taunts of the society. Only a resilient woman who could face all such challenges can survive against this male dominant society. As the number of such women rises there could be a time when the father-oriented society could cease to exist. Families modelled on the West or the father-oriented families could not be the only ones that are decimated. Even though every system and culture has an inner strength of its own for survival, the institution of 'family' could undergo a transformation that is alien to all our orthodox beliefs.

Translated by
Abhiruchi Chandru

A CONSTANTLY WIDENING CANVAS

M.S. Asha Devi

To draw the map and identify the major trends and uniqueness of women's expression in literature is both a challenge and an interesting sojourn. This attempt has got its historical relevance as well. It is a process that is multidimensional in its nature. It is mounted on the gender canvas, apart from having social relevance and also the addresses the major question of feminist poetics inherent within.

It's very interesting to note that the first important women writer of Kannada is the most important feminist writer of not only Kannada but of the world. Akkamahadevi and other women vachanakaras possess the spirit and philosophical clarity of Feminism. *Akkamahadevi, Neelamma, Muktaayakka, Lingamma, Akkanagamma* are some of the major women *vachanakaras.* All these women have encountered all major institutions of patriarchy of marriage, gender, language, economy and so on.

To discuss some of the important contributions of these writers means to authenticate the strong base of Kannada women writing. It has been common and fundamental pattern of women writing that it is a sojourn towards identity and authenticity. These women of 12th century present not only philosophical model but also the practical possibilities of it. Hence this movement and their writing mark the milestone in the women's discourse of not only Karnataka but of pan Indian situation. Both Akkamahadevi and Neelamma encountered the institution of marriage in all its aspects, including the sexual dimension. In one of her vachanas Neelamma says:

'If at all the word 'WIFE' could be silent'

Here probably Neelamma is questioning the very concept of the notion of 'wife', which is totally patriarchal in its

structure and role. In a marriage, the role of the wife is defined and followed under patriarchal value system. By rejecting the very word, Neelamma is rejecting the hierarchy of the system. When she says that the word 'wife' has to be *silenced* she is suggesting *the silence of the value system itself.*

These women writers differ exclusively from that of *Bhakti* Movement as a whole. The way they tried to redefine the term *Bhakti* shows the strength of their thought process. *Bhakti* is not only the way of metaphysical ecstasy but is also the path of social realisation. They did their best to create the social equal platform on par with men. Though they got the moral support from their fellow men, one needs to take into consideration the fact that fundamental change will occur only when one is determined to get it at any cost, with or without support.

So change in sensibility is the real indicator of any change. We can perceive that as the self image of these *vachanakaras.* Their portrait of Self is something astonishing. There is not a trace of self-pity within them. They present themselves with total self-dignity. Let me quote Neelamma again:

'I am not a coward
I am the woman with all happiness and courage'

While discussing women *Vachanakaras* at length, my intention is to re-establish the profound base that Kannada women's literature holds. They are the icons in every other sense: theme, form and expression.

Though in between we can meet *Sanchi Honnamma* and others, it's within the Renaissance that the women writing gained momentum.

If one has to estimate or understand the major concerns of Kannada women writing, we can do that in various patterns. Here I would like to probe on the basis of the changes in the characteristics of women in women's writing. Perhaps this will help us to understand the shifts of women sensibility in general and women expression in literature in

particular. This will also serve the purpose of identifying the special characteristics and the challenges of women's writing.

To categorize women's writings dramatically I would like to classify them as:

1 From Sati Shiromani to Sahadharmini
2 The world of womanhood
3 The ocean of self-pity
4 Unveiling the camouflage
5 The touch stone of self-authentication

It all started with Indian Renaissance. Here lies the most paradoxical happening of women's discourse and women's writing. It is true that women's education was one of the prime agendas of Renaissance. But the goal was not that of 'Free Woman'. The leaders and the Nation wanted educated woman who could serve many purposes of that time which was the changed image of India with educated woman, strengthening of freedom movement etc.. But the real impact of this revolution was deeper and fundamental. It brought out a phenomenal change in women which Renaissance never anticipated. The process of self-realisation started gaining momentum. Not that it was not there before. They found a medium of expression and this made all the difference. This was definitely not the leaders that the Renaissance anticipated.

It is also evident at this point that the patriarchal clutches were so strong and deep with these educated women and they were hesitant of the total change. But it was their first very step. If we look at *Nanjangudu Tirumalamba*'s novel *'Nabha'*, the heroine of the novel, a widow, though she had an opportunity of re-marriage she prefers not to get married. She is educated and employed; but with all this she was hesitant of taking the decision of re-marriage. This is true with *Kodagina Gouramma*'s story *'Vaniya Samasye'* as well. Vani refuses the offer of a new life. Of course the context here is even more complex. Vani rejects this probably to save her friend's marriage.

The main trend of this age is to locate women in the context of men and society. They tend to look at everything including women's body, personality and life -- through men's eyes. They try to look at themselves as adjacent to the men in their life. Though they can make out the pyramid of hierarchy, they were not fully prepared enough to encounter it. Hence we can call this as sojourn from *Sati Shiromani* to *Sahadharmini*. We can even call this perspective as '*Gruhavaadini*'. Home and marriage were their primary concerns. They are ready to come out of this, provided a stage is ready or if the approval is given by the value system. This is mainly because they thought change in the value system has to be done by authority of the value system. Women are at the receiving end. But as I said in the beginning, the Renaissance was not for a 'free woman', it was looking for an educated, yet submissive woman who is fully under the control of the system. If you look at the response of Maasti Venkatesh Iyer to Nanjangudu Thirumalamba we will understand this better. Maasti, in his reaction to one of the works of Thirumalamba he says, 'Safeguarding the culture is mainly the responsibility of women; hence she has to mind her steps towards change or modernity'. This clearly reflects and represents patriarchy.

It is in these complexities that one should analyse early writers like Thirumalamba, Kalyanamma and others.

In her preface to '*Rangavalli*', an anthology of women's short stories, *Thirumalamba* makes a comment with all irony and sadness. 'Leave alone appreciation and criticism, no man, writer or reader, is willing to read women's writings. This is the pathetic condition of women's writings in Kannada'. This is a clear indication of one important process that our women writers have undergone. It is the question of both *Asthitva (Existence)* and *Asmithe (Identity)*. This search is personal as well as representative of all women, it is social as well as political, it is a search as well as an encounter. Throughout women's writings it is evident in all its possibilities and dimensions.

To summarise as a hypothesis, the soul of women's writings is the cultural *construct of womanhood*. It is also the process of *Reconstruction* as well. For this is a process that is aimed at undoing the established role and pattern of women's identity.

This search begins with the mode of certain self-pity. This kind of mindset is very natural to movements for liberation. It is mainly because of the lack of political authenticity availed to their role and identity. This is the realisation moment of the hierarchical pattern of one's social structure. If we look at the characters of Triveni, one of our very popular writers, one can easily come across many women who are full of self-pity. Though some of them belong to the first generation of educated women they end up as tragic heroines. Take Meera of Triveni's '*Apasvara*' for example. Despite her education, service mindedness, by the end she feels that her life is a failure and is filled with self-pity. This happens mainly because of lack of self-dignity.

An exceptional writer of this time is *M.K. Indira*. She began her writing career in her 40s; and her perspective about women is full of self-dignity. '*Phaniyamma*' and '*Taggina Mane Seethe*' are the classic examples wherein her women never give up. Their love and faith about life and human beings is extraordinary.

The most important trend in Kannada women's writings emerged with *Veena Shanteshwar* and *Vaidehi*, representing two different modes of women resistance. Veena tried to discover and construct the *new woman* in her works. They try to unveil the camouflage of patriarchy. Veena's short novel '*Gandasaru*' and short stories like '*Koneya Daari*', '*Mullugalu*' are the best examples. Women in her stories staunchly believe that unless we break the patriarchal patterns it's impossible to get the new women. Breaking these rules mean adopting men's ways of being and living. This is roughly the canvas of Veena's writings. Eventually, this was shocking for both men and women of her time.

Vaidehi's canvas is entirely different. She tried to search the new woman in the very existing pattern itself. In other

words, she proposed the new way of looking at women. Strength is inbuilt within the quality of women is Vaidehi's faith. Hence all her characters from daily mundane life looked totally afresh with their changed version of narration. Both in her poetry and short stories she establishes this group of self-made and self-reliant women. *Vaidehi*'s *'Mallinathana Dhyana,'* according to me, is one of the most important cultural text of our times. In one of her essays she says, 'Women are not equal to men. Rather men are never equal to women. Both are different and unique.' This reminds one of Gandhi's statements about men and women, 'Separate but Equal'.

The two different models of Veena and Vaidehi marked not only literary models but also socio-cultural models of women's discourse of India.

Currently, contemporary Kannada writing is taking a different mode. *Prathibha Nandakumar, Savitha Nagabhushana, Lalitha Siddabasavayya, H. Nagaveni* are the most important and trend-setting writers. To summarise these writers' search, we can put it as the sojourn towards self-authentication. *Nagaveni*'s *'Gandhi Banda'* is one of the most important novels of Modern India. This novel represents not only the widened canvas of women writing, but also her world view which is totally different from that of men. The 'inclusiveness' inherent in the woman's world view is evident in this novel.

Prathibha, Savitha and *Lalitha* are definitely establishing new sensibility in a new language. These writers are taking women out of the clutches of patriarchy. Their fight is no longer with or against patriarchy; its main challenge is women's self-restraint. One can encounter patriarchy if they can overcome their established self-image. Look at the changed narration of women in *Savitha*'s *'Konda Haayuvalu'*. The woman in this poem is facing the *agnidivya* at every stage of her life. She's not afraid, neither is she ready to give up. On the contrary, she is becoming stronger and stronger. It is her husband who is becoming weaker and is afraid of the happenings of life.

One should acknowledge the role of Feminist thinkers and activists in this process. Vijaya Dabbe and *B.N. Sumitrabai* are the two important personalities who shaped the feminist mode of thinking in Kannada literary world. Sumitrabai's *'Sarahaddugala Aache Eeche'* is a classic attempt to revealuate Kannada literary tradition from within feminist perspective.

Vinaya Vakkunada, Sumangala, Sunanda Kadame, Akshatha, Bharati are other contemporary writers one has to take in to account. Kannada women's writing is here to vouch for the changed self-image and to propose a novel women's world view.

M.S. Ashadevi is among the leading Kannada feminist critics. She has several published works to her credit.

THE ANIKETANA TEAM

Abhiruchi Chandru ..... abhiruchichandru@gmail.com
Abhiruchi Chandru writes dialogues for tv serials. He is interested in Kannada literature.

K.V.Aditya Bharadwaj ..... adityabharadwaja@gmail.com
K.V.Aditya Bharadwaj, a journalist presently working with The Hindu.

Archana Nathan ..... arrchid@gmail.com
Archana Nathan works for The Hindu. She is interested in films, art and literature.

Ashwin Kumar A.P. ..... ashwinkumar.ap@gmail.com
Ashwin Kumar A.P. teaches at Department of English, Tumkur University, Karnataka, and edits a research journal called '*Pragmata: Journal of Human Sciences*'. His research is in the field of comparative science of cultures.

Channakeshava G ..... gchannakeshava@gmail.com
Channakeshava is a theatre activist, actor, director and designer. He designed the Kannada journal *Deshakaala*. He has undergone training in visual arts at the Chitrakala Parishat, Bangalore, and was trained in theatre at the Ninasam Theatre Institute, Heggodu. He has directed several theatre productions in South Indian languages and also in English. He is a freelancing artist in many art disciplines.

Chitra Phalguni ..... chitraphalguni@rediffmail.com
Chitra Phalguni is a journalist by profession. She is interested in literature.

Deepa Ganesh ..... deepa.oldworld@gmail.com
Deepa Ganesh works as Senior Assistant Editor with The Hindu.

M.R. Maithreyi ..... mrmaithreyi@gmail.com
M.R. Maithreyi has had a long stint as a journalist, and presently works as copy editor. She has been translating for several decades now.

Malathi Shenoy ..... Malathi.shenoy@gmail.com
Malathi Shenoy is a voracious reader who loves observing little details and penning them down in her blog, '*Nenapina sanchiyinda - Random ramblings*'.

Nayana Kashyap ..... Ph: 9480238803
Nayana Kashyap is English lecturer in Madikeri. She is a translator by interest and has done several translations into English from Kannada. She has translated Pablo Neruda to Kannada. Nayana loves to travel.

Niharika Shenoy ..... niha.charu@gmail.com
Niharika Shenoy currently works as a freelance graphic designer. In her spare time, she dabbles in art, music and literature.

Dr. Nikhila H. ..... nikhila05@gmail.com
Dr. Nikhila H. teaches in the Department of Film Studies and Visual Communication, The EFL University, Hyderabad. Her doctoral work was on women's writing and communalism. Her publications are in the area of Gender Studies; her other areas of research interest are Film and Visual Culture Studies.

Nisar Ahmed S. ..... englishmeshtru.nisar@gmail.com
Nisar Ahmed S. works as lecturer in English at Government Pre-University College, Kamalapura, in Hospete Taluk of Bellary distirct. Basically hailing from Chitradurga, he has keen interest in translations and literary activities. Ph: 9844702929

Pradeep Kumar M. ..... pradeepkumardec@gmail.com
Pradeep Kumar M. hails from the coastal city of Mangalore in Dakshina Kannada district. He works in the police force and has worked in the communally sensitive situations of the Dakshina district.

Praveen Shivashankar ..... praveen.shivashankar@gmail.com
Praveen Shivashankar works for Daon Inc., in the field of Biometric Identification and writes regularly on the arts. He is a student of Hindustani Classical music and also one of the trustees of Yoga

Kshema Rehabilitation & Wellness Centre, an NGO in Bangalore working towards improving the Quality of Life of people.

M.R. Rakshith ..... rakkimr@gmail.com
M.R. Rakshith teaches English at a college in Bengaluru. Among his chief interests are translation, Indian classical music, and serious cinema. Apart from translating, he has also assisted in editing several books. Ph: 98454-08707

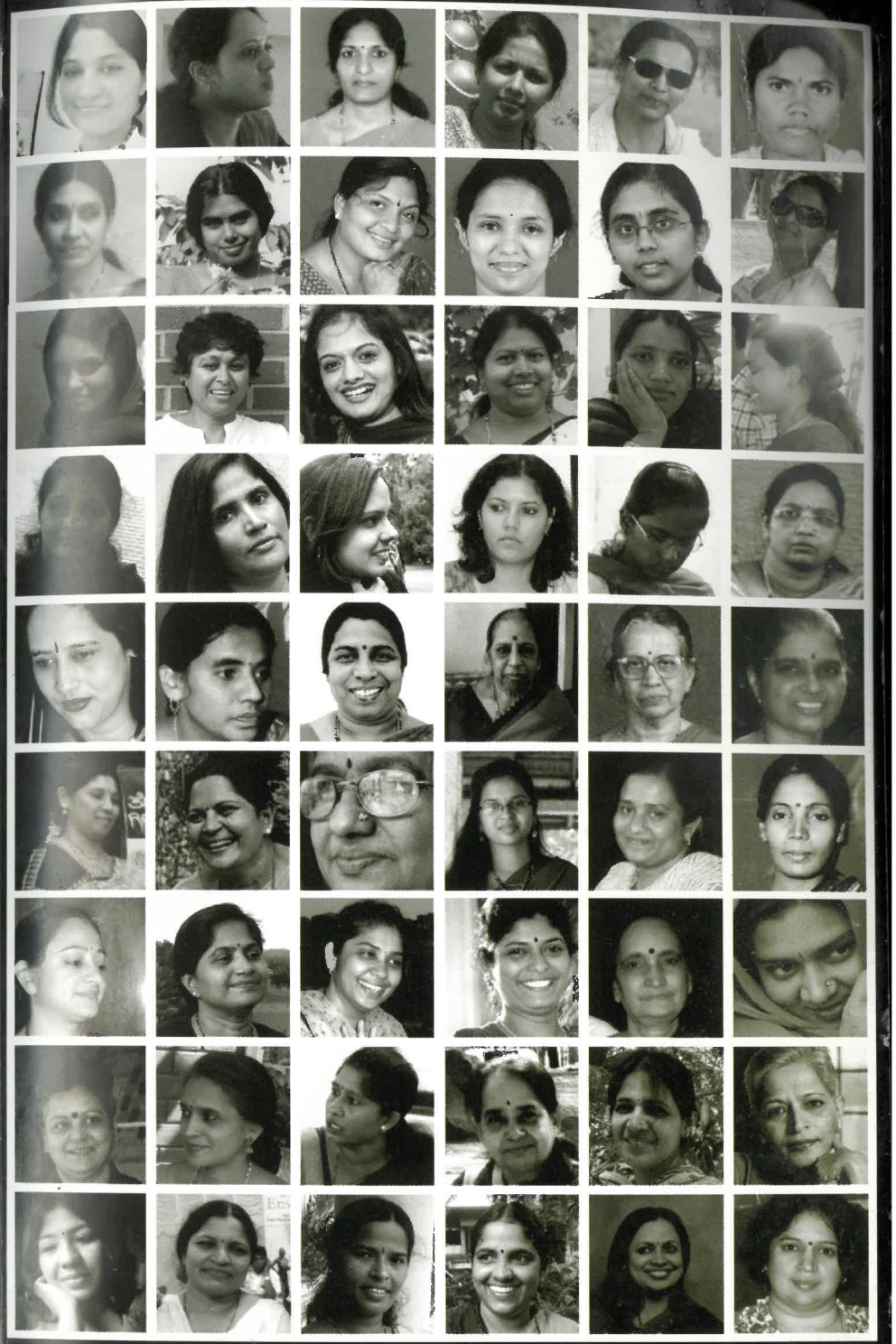
S.R. Ramakrishna ..... srramakrishna@gmail.com
S.R. Ramakrishna is a journalist. He is a translator of repute and has published several works, including Siddalingaiah's autobiography, *Ooru Keri*. Ramakrishna is a music composer and has composed for several plays, films and tv serials, apart from publishing independent albums. 98457-21202

Samvartha ..... crazymindseye@gmail.com
Samvartha has worked as a lecturer and journalist, and is passionately interested in films and poetry. Ph: 9844121911

Vidya M. Joseph ..... vidyachenni@gmail.com
Vidya M. Joseph is Assistant Professor of English at Sir M.V. Government Arts and Commerce College, Bhadravathi. Along with a group of translators, she has worked on Sarvajna's vachanas to be published shortly. After a research project for the UGC on *Women and Media: A Case Study of Karnataka in 2011*, she is presently working on her doctoral thesis on Toni Morrison's fiction.

Vaishali K.S. ..... Vaishali.k.srinivas@gmail.com
Vaishali K.S. Is a professor at the Department of English, Bangalore University. Her translation of Rokeya Shekhawat Hossain's novella *Padmaraga* has been published by Christ University.

Sir. M. Visvesvaraya First Garde College
Ref No.
Date.
HAL, Bangalore



BLOSSO...
Ph. : 9445373202

Karnataka Sahitya Academy
Kannada Bhavana, J.C. Road, Bengaluru 560002
Phone: 080 22211730 / 22106460